

# BACACAY REVISITED

***Bacacay* by Witold Gombrowicz, translated from the Polish and annotated by Christopher Makosa**

*Bacacay* by [Witold Gombrowicz](#) is a collection of ten stories, seven of which - written between 1928 and 1933 - appeared in book form as *Pamiętnik z Okresu Dojrzwania* (1933) [*The Memoir of a Time of Immaturity*]. The other three tales (1937-1938) were published in various magazines in pre-war Poland. This website features the first five stories in their order of appearance in the 1987 Polish edition of *Bakakaj* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków), which formed the basis for my translation.

I translated *Bacacay* ten years ago in New York. In 1994, on Mme. Rita Gombrowicz's advice, I submitted my manuscript to Yale University Press because it was allegedly planning to publish the complete works of Witold Gombrowicz.<sup>1</sup> The publisher (represented by Mr. Jonathan Brent) expressed interest in the project, acknowledged receipt of the translation - and then for two years ignored my numerous calls and letters. Eventually, I persuaded a certain Polish writer to retrieve my MS from the slush pile, where it evidently reposed in a state of *requiescat in pace*. My attempt to get *Bacacay* published in 1996 was thwarted by Polish YUP reviewers on general principle. I did not belong; therefore, I was given short shrift.

At the beginning of 1999, the literary e-zine *The Alsop Review* invited me to publish my translation of four stories from the collection (*Attorney Kraykowski's Dancer*, *Stefan Czarniecki's Memoir*, *A Premeditated Crime* and *A Feast at Countess von Doff's*). The 1999 version went down well with on-line readers and even won praise from the distinguished American writer John Hawkes (1925-1998), the finest prose stylist of his generation. Some time ago, however, I revisited it and could not resist the temptation of changing a thing or two. The present revision or re-revision supersedes the 1999 version which, as far as I am concerned, has outlived its usefulness.

Before starting work on Gombrowicz's stories, I had set myself three aims: textual fidelity, loyalty to the author's style and readability. Today I can honestly say that I have translated *Bacacay* in accordance with my self-imposed rules, save a few rare cases in which I decided to deviate from the path of fidelity. For example, I have changed almost all the characters' names in my rendering of *A Feast at Countess von Doff's* (literally, *A Feast at Countess Kothubay's*) to make them as comical in English as they are in the original.

To conclude, I have taken the utmost care to reproduce Gombrowicz's vigorous and often intricate rhythms, his slightly archaic diction, skewed syntax, stylized dialogue, imaginative phrasing, distinctive paragraphing and colorful rhetoric.

The reader will, I hope, appreciate the hypnotic power of his prose in the translation posted below.

Prague, July 3, 2004

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<sup>1</sup> The New York-based commercial publisher Harcourt Brace Trade cited that as the reason for rejecting my translation of *Bacacy* in June 1995.

## ATTORNEY KRAYKOWSKI' S DANCER

by Witold Gombrowicz

Translated from the Polish by Christopher Makosa

This was the thirty-fourth time I went to see *The Gypsy Princess* operetta [1] - and since it was getting late, I skipped the line and addressed myself directly to the ticket-seller: "For me, dear lady, one for the gallery as usual, make it snappy" - suddenly someone took me by the collar behind me and coldly - yes, coldly - pulled me away from the window and pushed toward the proper place, i.e. where the line ended. My heart missed a beat, I gasped for breath - isn't it mortifying to be collared suddenly in a public place? - but I looked around: it was a tall, spruce, fragrant fellow with a clipped little mustache. Conversing with two elegant ladies and one gentleman, he was inspecting the tickets he had just bought.

All looked at me - and I had to say something.

"Did you do that, sir?" I asked perhaps in an ironic, perhaps even ominous tone, but since I had suddenly grown weak, I asked too softly.

"Eh?" he asked, leaning toward me.

"Did you do that, sir?" I repeated, but again - too softly.

"Yes, I did. Over there - to the end. Order! Europe!" - and addressing the ladies, he remarked: "We should teach, teach tirelessly, or we'll never stop being a horde of Zulus."

Some forty pairs of eyes and various faces - my heart was beating, my voice had died away, I bent my steps toward the exit - at the last moment (I bless it, that moment) - something shifted within me and I turned back. I got in line, bought a ticket and only just made it for the first measures of the introduction, but this time I didn't sink my soul into the performance as usual. While the Gypsy Princess sang striking the castanets, arching her torso and gasping - dapper young men with stand-up collars and top hats marched in single file under her lifted arm - I, looking down at the fair-haired, pomaded head that loomed in the front rows of the parquet, kept repeating: "Oh, so that's how it is!"

After Act One I went downstairs, leaned lightly against the railing of the orchestra - and waited a little. Suddenly - I bowed. He didn't acknowledge it. So one more bow - then I began to survey the boxes and again - I bowed when an opportune moment came. I returned upstairs, I trembled, I was exhausted.

Having come out of the theater, I stationed myself on the sidewalk. Soon after, he appeared - he was taking his leave of one of the ladies and her husband: "Till we meet again, dearest friends, so - without fail - I beseech you! - tomorrow at ten at *Polonia*, my respects." Then he helped the other lady into the taxi and when he was about to get in, I approached.

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but perhaps you would be kind enough to give me a lift a little way: I just love to ride in style."

"Get away from me!" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps you would support me," I calmly addressed the driver. Inwardly I felt unusually

calm. "I like . . ." - but the car was already moving away. Even though I don't have much money - merely for my indispensable needs - I hopped into the next taxi and told the driver to follow them.

"Excuse me," I said to the porter of a five-story brownstone house. "Wasn't it Dziubiński, the engineer, who entered a moment ago?"

"Why no, sir," he replied. "It was Attorney Kraykowski and his wife."

I returned to my place. That night I couldn't fall asleep - my mind returned repeatedly to the whole incident at the theater, to my bows and to the Attorney's departure - I tossed from side to side in the state of wakefulness and increased activity which doesn't let one fall asleep and which, at the same time, due to one's persistent tossing and turning, constitutes another waking dream, as it were. First thing the next morning, I sent a magnificent bouquet of roses to Attorney Kraykowski's address. Across the house from where he lived was a small creamery with a porch - I spent the whole morning sitting there and finally saw him about three, in an elegant gray suit, cane in hand. Oh, yes - on he came and whistled along, swinging the cane now and then, swinging the cane... Immediately I paid the check and ran out after him - and admiring the slight undulating movement of his back, I reveled in the fact that he didn't know anything; that it was mine, internal. He was trailing a waft of fragrance behind him, he was fresh - it seemed impossible to make any close contact with him. But I found a remedy for that, too! I decided: if he turns left, you'll buy this book, *The Adventure* by London, of which you've been dreaming for so long - but if he turns right, you'll never have it, never ever; even if you got it for free, you'd never read so much as one page! It would be lost! Oh, I could contemplate for hours that spot on his neck where hair terminates in an even line and a white nape follows. He turned left. Under different circumstances I would at once have run to the bookstore, but now I kept walking behind him - and with only a sense of inexpressible gratitude.

The sight of a flower woman gave me a new idea: after all, I could at once, immediately - it lay in my power - give him a round of applause, pay discreet homage, something he might not notice. So what if he didn't notice? After all, it's even more beautiful to worship someone in secret. I bought a small bouquet, overtook him - as soon as I entered his field of vision it became impossible for me to walk at a measured, leisurely pace - and imperceptibly threw a few shy violets at his feet. This way, I suddenly found myself in an extremely odd situation: I constantly walked further and further, without knowing if he was going on behind me or perhaps had turned a corner or entered a gate; and I had no strength to turn around - I wouldn't have turned around even if I don't know what, everything altogether, had depended on it; but when I finally mastered myself, pretended to be losing my hat and retraced my steps - he was no longer behind me.

Till evening I lived only for the thought of *Polonia*.

I came close behind them into a richly decorated room and sat down at the next table. I had a premonition that this would cost me dear, but in the final analysis (I thought), it made no difference and perhaps - I wouldn't live more than a year, I didn't need to economize. They spotted me right away; the ladies were even so tactless that they began to whisper - but he didn't fall short of my expectations. He didn't pay the slightest attention to me: he danced attendance, now stooping close toward the ladies, now looking around to watch the other women. While examining the menu, he spoke deliberately,

with relish:

"*Hors d'oeuvres*, caviar... mayonnaise... *poularde*...pineapple for dessert - black coffee, *Pommard*, *Chablis*, cognac and the liqueurs."

I placed an order.

"Caviar - mayonnaise - *poularde* - pineapple for dessert - black coffee, *Pommard*, *Chablis*, cognac and the liqueurs."

It lasted a long time. The Attorney ate plenty of food, especially the *poularde* [2] - while I had to force myself - in fact, I already thought I wouldn't be up to it and looked in terror to see if he would take more again. He kept on taking more and ate with gusto, in big mouthfuls, ate mercilessly, washing the food down with wine, until finally it became a real ordeal for me. I think I'll never be able to look at *poularde* again and I'll never manage to swallow mayonnaise, unless - unless some day we go to the restaurant together again, in which case it would be different: then, I know it for sure, then I would persevere. He also drank so much wine that my head began to reel. The mirror reflected his figure! How magnificently he was bending over! How deftly and expertly fixing himself his cocktail! How elegantly, toothpick between teeth, quipping! He had a bald spot camouflaged at the crown of his head, manicured hands with a signet ring on one finger and a deep voice: a baritone that was soft, caressing. The Attorney's wife had nothing remarkable about her - she was, one might say, unworthy - but the Doctor's wife! Immediately I noticed that his voice, when he addressed the Doctor's wife, assumed softer and rounder tones. Oh, yes! Sure thing! The Doctor's wife was as if made for him: svelte, serpentine, sophisticated, idle - a pussycat with a wonderful feminine whimsy. And, in his mouth, the words *little claws* sounded superb - it could be seen that he liked to . . . that he knew how to . . . Little claws, babe, carousal, rake, roué, tippler - ha, ha, he was a tippler, the dear Doc! And: "I beseech you," that "I beseech you," so expressive and irresistible, so decorous and yet brooking no objection, like a three-word chronicle of all possible triumphs. And his nails were pink, one especially, on his pinky. I didn't return home till about two in the morning and flung myself onto the bed, fully clothed. I was saturated, sated, crushed, I got the hiccups, my head was abuzz and the delicate dishes bloated my stomach. Orgy! Orgy and merrymaking, revels! "A night at the restaurant," I whispered, "nighttime revels! For the first time - nighttime revels! Because of him - and for him!

From then on I sat every day on the porch of the creamery waiting for the Attorney and, whenever he appeared, I followed him. Someone else, perhaps, couldn't sacrifice six or seven hours to wait. But I had plenty of time. My disease, epilepsy, was my only occupation - and an extremely rare occupation - in the margin of the string of days; besides that: no other duties, I had time to spare. I wasn't distracted, like others, by relatives, acquaintances and friends, women and dances; except for only one dance - St. Vitus's dance - I knew neither dances nor women. A modest little income sufficed for my needs and, anyhow, there were grounds to believe that my frail constitution wouldn't last long - why, then, should I economize? From morning to night I was free, unoccupied; it was like an unending holiday, a continuous stretch of time: I was the sultan, and the hours - my nymphs of paradise...

Do come at last - O death!

The Attorney loved to eat and it's difficult to express how beautiful that was; when returning from the Court, he always stopped over at a pastry shop and ate two napoleons

there - I spied on him through the display window: standing at the counter, he slid the pastries into his mouth gingerly, so as not to become sullied by the custard, and then licked his fingers clean daintily or wiped them with a paper napkin. I thought about it for a long time and finally, one day, I walked into that pastry shop. "Ma'am, you know Attorney Kraykowski? He eats two napoleons in here. You do? Then let me pay for the napoleons for a month in advance. When he comes in, please don't accept any money, only smile: 'it's already taken care of.' It's nothing: simply, you see, I've lost a bet."

The next day he came in as usual, ate and wanted to pay - the cashier refused to accept the money - got irritated and dropped the coin into the poor-box. What did it matter to me? A mere formality: he can give as much as he wants for homeless children - the fact remains that he ate two of my napoleons. But I won't describe everything here, for is it possible to describe everything anyway? It was [like] a [life at] sea - from morning till evening, and often at night, too. It was wild, as when, for example, we once sat facing each other, eye to eye, on the tram; and sweet whenever I could do him a favor - but at times also ridiculous. Ridiculous, sweet and wild? - yes, nothing is so difficult and delicate, so sacred even, as the personality of man; nothing can equal that rapacity of secret relations, slight and purposeless, born between strangers to shackle them imperceptibly together with a monstrous bond. Imagine the Attorney walking out of a public urinal, reaching for change and finding out that the charge . . . has already been paid. What does he feel then? Imagine him encountering at every step signs of hero-worship, reverence and servility, allegiance and a sense of steadfast duty, ardor. But the Doctor's wife! The dreadful conduct of the Doctor's wife nagged at me. Didn't his courtship appeal to her, didn't the toothpick and cocktail at Polonia make any impression on her? Quite obviously, she didn't consent - once, I noticed, he left her place furious, his tie askew . . . What a woman! What to do, how induce her, how persuade so she will at once understand well, grasp the way I did, feel. After long hesitation, I decided: an anonymous letter - that's the best.

*"Madam!*

*How can you? Your conduct is incomprehensible; no, you can't act like that! Are you insensitive to that shape, to those gestures and modulations, to that fragrance? Don't you grasp that perfection? What are you a woman for? If I were you, I would know what to do if he only deigned to beckon with his finger to my miserable, sluggish female body."*

Several days later, Attorney Kraykowski (it was in an empty street, late in the evening) stopped, wheeled around and began to wait, cane in hand. It would have been unseemly to retreat - so I continued on my way, even though a certain languor was suffusing my body - when suddenly he grabbed my shoulder and shook me, banging the cane on the ground.

"What's the meaning of those idiotic libels? Why are you bothering me?" he shouted.

"How come you're following me? What is this? I'll thrash you with my cane! I'll break your bones!"

I couldn't speak. I was happy. I received it like Communion and closed my eyes. In total silence, I bent over and offered my back. I waited - and experienced a few perfect moments that can be granted only to those who really don't have many days before them.

When I straightened up, he was quickly walking away, tap-tapping with his cane. My heart brimming over, in a mood of grace and blessing, I returned by empty streets. Too little, I thought, too little! All too little! More - still more!

And contrition mingled with gratitude. Of course! She viewed my letter as a wretched bit of rhetoric, a silly hoax, and showed it to the Attorney. Instead of helping, I did harm, and all because I'm too indolent, sluggish, I give too little of myself - too little seriousness and responsibility; I can't inspire understanding.

*"Madam!*

*In order to make you realize, to find a way to your conscience - I declare that, beginning with today, I'm going to practice various forms of self-mortification (fasts, etc.) so long as this doesn't happen. Madam, you are impudent! What words do I have to use to explain the meaning of necessity, obligation, dog-like duty? How long do I have to put up with this? What is this stubbornness supposed to mean? Why this hubris?!"*

And the next day, having remembered an important detail, I wrote:

*" 'Violette' perfume only. He likes it."*

From then on, the Attorney stopped seeing the Doctor's wife. Something gnawed at me, I couldn't sleep at night. I'm not naive. I'm knowledgeable about many things, a fact no one would suspect me of - I realize, for example, what impression a letter like this can create on the worldly and secular [3] person that the wife of the Doctor is. I can even smile, in moments of the utmost rapture, a still-waters-run-deep smile - but what of that? Did that make my suffering less intense and the torments I had inflicted on myself less painful? My indignation less relevant? My reverence for the Attorney less real? Oh, no! What is important? Life, health? Then I swear that with the same still-waters-run-deep little smile I would give my life and health so she . . . so she would provide satisfaction. Or maybe this woman had ethical scruples? What are stupid ethics in comparison with Attorney Kraykowski? Just in case, I decided to reassure her in that respect, too!

*"Madam, you must! The Doctor is a zero - thin air."*

But with her it wasn't ethics: it was simply hubris or, indeed, the absurd behavior of a sulky female and a lack of understanding of sacred elementary matters. I walked under her windows - what was going on up there, behind the drawn lace curtain (for she was a late riser), what frame of mind was she in? Women are too superficial! I tried magnetism: "You must, you must," I said time after time, gazing up at the window, "tonight, already tonight, if your husband isn't at home." Suddenly I remember that, after all, the Attorney wanted to give me a thrashing and that if he didn't do so in the street that day - then perhaps he didn't have enough time? So I drop everything and make a dash for the Court, whence he will, I know, walk out in a moment. Indeed, after a few minutes he walks out with two gentlemen, and then I approach and, in silence, offer my back.

The astonishment of the two gentlemen hovers above me, but I don't care about it - not even about the whole world! I half close my eyes, hunch up my shoulders and wait

confidently - but nothing falls. Finally I splutter, stammering up from a flagstone of the sidewalk:

"How about now? Anytime, anytime, anytime . . ."

"This is some idiot," his voice floats out above me. "I'm so absent-minded! I forgot about the conference! We'll talk some other time, good-bye gentlemen, here's some change, my man! My respects!"

And he got hurriedly into the taxi. Oh, these taxis! One of the gentlemen reached into his pocket. With a gesture of my open hand I stopped him.

"I'm neither a beggar nor an idiot. I have dignity - and I accept charity only from Attorney Kraykowski."

I devised a plan of hypnosis, of constant, consistent pressure by means of a thousand minute facts and mystical clues, which, without penetrating consciousness, would create a subconscious state of necessity. I would draw in chalk, on the wall of the house in which she lived, an arrow and a capital K. I'm not going to detail all my intrigues, be they more or less adroit: she was enmeshed in a web of strange goings-on. A shop clerk in a fashion house addressed her - accidentally on purpose - Mrs. Kraykowski! A porter she met on the stairs said that Judge Krayewski . . . asked if his umbrella had been sent back. Krayewski - Kraykowski, Judge - Attorney; one should be careful: constant dripping wears away the stone. Nobody knew by what miracle she brought, from town, the Attorney's scent on her dress: a bracing fragrance of his violet-scented soap and eau de cologne. Or, for example, an incident such as this: late in the night the phone rings - she starts up from her sleep, runs and hears an unfamiliar, imperative voice - immediately! - and nothing more. Or a scrap of paper stuck in the door and on it - nothing, an excerpt from a poem: "Do you know the *kra*y [country] where the lemon becomes ripe?" [\[4\]](#)

But gradually I was losing hope. The Attorney stopped seeing her - it seemed that my exertions had been to no avail. Already I was anticipating the moment of my final capitulation and grew apprehensive: I felt I couldn't reconcile myself to it. I couldn't endure any offense directed at the Attorney on that point, even if he didn't bother about it. To me, it would have been the ultimate insult, wrong and disgrace. Ultimate - yes, ultimate is the word. Although I couldn't believe it, I shuddered at the thought of an inevitable, imminent conclusion.

And yet . . . There is some benevolence, after all! And, oh, how clever they were - and incidentally, I have a grudge against the Attorney: why did he keep it this secret, didn't he know I suffered? Chance? Oh no, it wasn't chance - the heart, rather! One evening I was returning home by the Avenue [\[5\]](#) - when suddenly I had a hunch that I should step into the park. Actually, I should have gone to bed early, for at dawn the next day I was to nail, on the Attorney's door, a gilded nameplate with KRAYKOWSKI, ESQ. on it, but I had a hunch: in the park. I walked in - and at the far end, beyond the pond, I saw . . . oh, yes! I saw her wide-brimmed hat and his derby. Oh, you knaves, you treacherous rogues, you scoundrels! So while I was working so hard, they were meeting here secretly, unknown to me - and so artfully, too! They must have used taxis! They turned into a side alley and sat on a bench. I lay in wait in the shrubbery. I didn't expect anything, didn't think of anything - didn't want to know anything; I only squatted down behind a shrub and counted the leaves fast, without reflection, as if I weren't there at all.

And suddenly - the Attorney embraced her, pressed and whispered:

"It's nature . . . do you hear that? A nightingale. Now, quick - as long as it sings . . . To



the accompaniment, in time to the nightingale's song . . . I beseech you!"

And then . . . oh, it was cosmic, I couldn't restrain myself - it was as if all the forces of the world had converged in holy madness upon me; as if a monstrous pyre, a pyre of bones, a sacrificial pyre or an electric charge had given me a terrible jolt - I started up and began to scream at the top of my voice, all over the park:

"Attorney Kraykowski is . . . her! Attorney Kraykowski is . . . her! Attorney Kraykowski is . . . her!"

This touched off an alarm. One man ran, another escaped, people emerged suddenly from all sides - and I had a first seizure, a second, a third, I was bowled over and danced as never before, foaming at the mouth, all atremble and convulsed - a Bacchic dance. What happened later, I don't remember. I came to in the hospital.

I'm feeling increasingly bad. My recent experiences have exhausted me. Tomorrow, Attorney Kraykowski is leaving secretly, unknown to me (but I know it), for a small mountain resort in the Eastern Carpathians. He wants to hole up in the mountains for a few weeks and thinks that maybe I'll forget. After him! Yes, after him! Everywhere after that guiding star of mine! But the question is: will I return from this journey alive? These emotions are too strong. I might suddenly die in the street, against a fence - in which case, a brief note should be written: send my corpse to Attorney Kraykowski's address.

## NOTES

1. *The Gypsy Princess* or, literally, "The Czardas Princess" (Ger. "Die Csárdásfürstin"): Operetta in three acts by Emmerich Kálmán, first performed in 1915. The czardas is a Hungarian dance in duple time; it starts slowly and ends at a brisk pace.
2. *pouarde*: The French culinary term referring to a fat chicken or hen suitable for roasting.
3. *secular*: An exact translation of the word used in the original.
4. *Do you know the **k**ray where the lemon becomes ripe?*: An untranslatable pun on **Kraykowski**; the Polish word *kraj* (which is pronounced just like the "kray" in Kraykowski) stands for "country", "land." The narrator quotes the opening line of Mignon's song in *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (1796-1832), as paraphrased by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855). Incidentally, Goethe wrote: "[. . .] where **lemons bloom**": *Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen (/Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühen . . .)*, etc.
5. *Avenue*: The author meant *Aleje Jerozolimskie*, one of the main streets of downtown Warsaw.

# THE MEMOIR OF STEFAN CZARNIECKI

by Witold Gombrowicz

Translated from the Polish by Christopher Makosa

1

I was born and raised in a home full of righteousness. With tender emotion I let my thoughts run toward you - O my childhood! I see my father, a fine-looking man, of haughty bearing, with a face in which everything - his gaze, features and grizzled hair - conspired to create the image of a perfect, noble race. I also see you, O mother, in immaculate black, with only a pair of old-style diamond earrings. I also see myself - a small, serious, thoughtful boy - and I feel like crying because of my dashed hopes. Perhaps the only blemish on our family life was that father hated mother. It's not that he hated her - I didn't express myself well; rather, he detested her, but why? - I never could tell and this is exactly where the mystery begins whose vapors brought me, in my mature years, to moral disaster. For what am I today? A pipsqueak or - better still - a moral bankrupt. What do I do, for instance? Kissing a lady's hand, I slobber all over it, then quickly take out a handkerchief, and with "Oh, pardon me" wipe the hand with the handkerchief.

I soon noticed that father avoided mother's touch like the plague. What is more - he avoided eye contact with her and, while talking to her, he usually looked away or inspected his fingernails. There was nothing sadder than that averted gaze of my father. Once in a while, however, he looked askance at her with an expression of supreme disgust. This was beyond my comprehension, for I felt no aversion toward mother. Indeed, although she grew excessively fat and overflowed on all sides, I liked to snuggle up to her and rest my little head on her lap. But how, under these circumstances, am I to explain the fact of my existence, how did I come into the world? I suppose that I was created - so to speak - through coercion, with clenched teeth, against natural reflexes; in a word, I suppose that for some time my father, in the name of marital duty, grappled heroically with disgust (for he placed the honor of his manhood above all else) and that I, a little child, was the fruit of that heroism.

After this superhuman and - in all probability - one-time effort, his disgust erupted with an elemental force. Once I overheard him shouting at mother, cracking his knuckles: "You're getting bald! Soon you'll be bald as a cannonball! A bald woman: do you understand what that means to me - a bald woman? Female baldness ... a wig ... no, I won't stand that!"

And he added more quietly, in a soft voice laden with anguish: "Oh, you're so horrible. You don't realize how horrible you are. At any rate, baldness is a mere detail - just like a nose; this or that detail can be horrible - that also happens in the Aryan race. But you're horrible in your entirety, you're filled with hideousness from head to toe, you're hideousness itself ... Oh, if only one spot on your body were free of that element of hideousness, I would have at least a point of contact, some basis and, I swear, I would

focus on it all the feelings I vowed to you at the altar. Oh, God!"

This was beyond my comprehension. How was mother's baldness worse than father's? And mother's teeth were even better: there was a white eyetooth with a gold filling among them ... And why did mother, on her part, not only not find father disgusting but, on the contrary, liked to smooth his hair in the presence of guests - because that was the only time father did not recoil. My mother was full of majesty. To this day, I see her officiating at a charity ball or dinner party, or making an evening retreat with servants in her private chapel.

My mother's piety was unequalled; this was not so much ardor as greed - greed for fasting, prayer and good deeds. At the appointed hour, the manservant, the cook, the maid, the janitor and myself appeared in the pitch darkness of the chapel draped with crepe. After the prayers, a sermon began: "It's a sin! It's hideous!" mother said forcefully, her chin quaking and swaying like a yolk in an egg. Perhaps I'm speaking without the respect due to the dear shades? Life has taught me this language, the language of mystery ...but let's not anticipate events.

Once in a while, mother summoned the cook, the manservant, the janitor, the maid and myself at an unusual hour. "Pray, poor child, for the soul of that monster - your father; and you also pray for the soul of your Master, sold to the devil!" More than once, we chanted litanies under her leadership until four or five in the morning, until the door flew open and father appeared, in tails or a tuxedo, his face portraying extreme distaste. "On your knees!" mother, undulating and swaying, exclaimed approaching him, her finger pointing to a likeness of Christ. "Away with you, off to bed, on the double!" father ordered the domestics in a lordly manner. "These are my servants!" mother replied, and father left hastily to the accompaniment of our suppliant cries before the altar.

What did that mean, and why did mother say "his dirty deeds" - why did she loathe father's deeds, when father, in turn, loathed mother? The innocent mind of a child was lost in these secrets. "Lecher," mother said, "remember - don't tolerate it! He who does not cry out in repulsion at the sign of sin, let him tie a millstone around his neck. You can't loathe, despise or hate. He swore, and now he loathes! He swore not to loathe! Fire of hell! He loathes me - but I also loathe him! Judgment Day shall come! In the other world we shall see which of us is better. Nose? - Soul! The soul has neither nose nor baldpate, and ardent faith opens the gates to future delights in Paradise. The time will come when your father, writhing in torments, will implore me, seated on Jehovah's - or rather, I meant to say, the Lord's - right hand, to give him my moistened finger to lick. We will see if he will loathe me!" Father, for that matter, was also pious and attended church regularly - but he never went to our chapel at home. More than once, perfectly urbane, he said, squinting like the aristocrat he was: "Believe me, my dear, it's tactless of you, and when I see you in front of the altar with your nose and ears, as well as with your lips - I'm certain that Christ also feels uneasy. Naturally, I don't deny your right to piety," he added, "in fact, being a neophyte is a beautiful thing from the religious point of view - but that won't help you. Nature is implacable, and remember the French saying: *"Dieu pardonnera, les hommes oublieront, mais le nez restera."* [6]

And I was growing up. Sometimes father took me on his lap and for a long time examined my face with anxiety. "So far, the nose is like mine," I heard him whisper. "Glory be to God! But look at those eyes ... and those ears ... poor child!" - and his noble features became drawn with pain. "He'll suffer terribly when he becomes aware of

things; I wouldn't be surprised if a kind of internal pogrom occurred within him then." What awareness or pogrom was he talking about? And generally - what color should be a rat born of a black male and a white female? Spotted? Or perhaps, when the contrasting colors are of equal force, the result of this conjunction is a colorless rat, a rat without any hue ... but I see again that I anticipate events with impatient digressions.

## 2

In school I was a diligent and model student, and yet I wasn't generally liked. I remember the first time: I stood before the principal, willing, eager, full of good intentions, with the eager readiness which had always characterized my nature - and the principal took me kindly under the chin. I assumed that the better my conduct, the more deserving of favors I would become by my teachers and classmates. My good intentions, however, crashed against the impenetrable wall of a mystery. What mystery? Bah! I didn't know, and actually I still don't know - I only felt that I was surrounded on all sides by an alien, hostile but charming mystery I couldn't penetrate. For isn't it a charming and mysterious rhyme: "One, two, three, all the Yids are dogs, and the Poles are golden birds, and I'm choosing thee" - which we used to call out to one another with classmates during games in the schoolyard? I felt it was charming: I recited it with emotion and delight, but I couldn't understand why it was charming - and it even seemed to me that I was quite redundant; that I should rather stand on the sidelines and only look on. I compensated for it with diligence and politeness, but my diligence and politeness met with the antipathy of not only the students but, which was stranger and even more unfair, of the teachers as well.

I also remember:

*Who are you? A little Pole!*

*What's your sign? The White Eagle sole! [\[7\]](#)*

And I remember my late lamented teacher of history and Polish literature - a quiet, rather sluggish old man, who never raised his voice. "Gentlemen," he said, coughing into an enormous foulard handkerchief or picking his ear with his finger, "what other nation was the Messiah of nations? A bulwark of Christianity? What other nation had Prince Józef Poniatowski? [\[8\]](#) As for the number of geniuses - especially forerunners - we have them as many as all Europe." And suddenly he began: "Dante?" - "I know, sir!" I immediately sprang up - "Kraśński! [\[9\]](#) Molière? - Fredro! [\[10\]](#) Newton? - Copernicus! Beethoven? - Chopin! Bach? - Moniuszko! [\[11\]](#) "Gentlemen, you see for yourselves," he summed up, "our language is a hundred times richer than French which, after all, is regarded as the finest of all languages. But then again, what can you say in French? *Petit, petiot, très petite* - at most. And Polish is so rich: *mały, malutki, maluchny, malusi, maleńki, malenieczki, malusieńki*, and so on." Even though I offered the best and quickest answers, he didn't like me. Why? - I didn't know, but on one occasion, clearing his throat, he said in a strange, knowing and confidential tone: "Poles, gentlemen, have always been lazy, as laziness goes hand in hand with great talents. Poles are talented but lazy rogues.

Poles are strangely likeable." Since then my enthusiasm for learning faded, but even with that I failed to win favor with my mentor, although generally he did have a weakness for lazy rogues.

Occasionally, he half closed one eye, and then the whole class pricked up its ears. "Spring, huh?" he said. "It's spreading through your bones, drawing you toward meadows and woods. Poles have always been like that - as they say, daredevils and tough customers. They won't sit still, believe you me... that's why women from Sweden, Denmark, France and Germany are mad about us - but we prefer our Polish women because their beauty is famous the world over." These and other remarks affected me to such an extent that I fell in love with a young lady I studied with on a bench in Łazienkowski Park. [\[12\]](#) For a long time I didn't know how to begin and when I finally asked: "May I, Miss?..." - she didn't even deign to answer. The next day, however, after consulting my schoolmates, I steeled myself and pinched her - and then she squinted and began to giggle...

Success - I returned triumphant, overjoyed and self-confident, but also strangely concerned about the giggling and squinting, which I found incomprehensible. "You know what?" I said in the schoolyard, "I'm also a tough customer, a rogue, a little Pole; it's a shame you couldn't see me in the Park yesterday - you would've seen some nice things..." And I told them everything. "Knucklehead!" they said, but for the first time they listened to me with rapt attention. Suddenly one of them exclaimed: "Frog!" - "Where! What? Whip the frog!" All lunged after it, and I with them. We began to whip it with thin sticks, until it died. Feverish and proud to be allowed to participate in their most exclusive games, seeing in this the beginning of a new era in my life, I cried: "You know, there is also a swallow! A swallow flew into the classroom and is flapping against the windows - just wait..." I brought the swallow, broke its wing so it wouldn't fly away, and my hand at once went to the stick. Meanwhile, everyone surrounded the bird. "Poor little thing," they were saying, "poor little birdie, give it some bread and milk." And when they noticed I was raising my stick, my classmate Pawelski so narrowed his eyes that his cheekbones became more prominent and punched me painfully in the face. "He got smashed in the face!" they exclaimed, "You've no honor, Czarniecki, go on, hit him back, smash his face in!" "How can I punch him if I'm weaker than him?" I replied. If I hit him back, he'll punch me again, and I'll be doubly dishonored." Then they all pounced on me and, sparing me neither jeers nor spiteful jibes, beat me up.

Love! Oh, what enchanting, incomprehensible nonsense - to pinch, nip or even embrace; oh, how much it encompasses! Oh, well! Today I know what to hold on to: I see here a secret affinity with war, for actually war is also all about pinching, nipping or embracing, but at that time I wasn't yet a moral bankrupt; on the contrary, I was full of good intentions. Love? I frankly admit that I was eager to love, for in this way I wanted to penetrate the wall of mystery... and I endured all the oddities of this strangest of affections with ardor and faith in the hope that perhaps one day I would understand what it was all about. "I want you!" I said to my beloved. She fobbed me off with vague generalities. "You're such a nonentity!" she said enigmatically, peering into my face, "a mollycoddled fop, a mama's boy!"

I shuddered: mama's boy? What did she mean by that? Could she have guessed...? For I had guessed at a thing or two. I already understood that, if my father was purebred to the marrow, my mother was also purebred, but in a different sense, in a Semitic sense.

What had induced father, that impoverished aristocrat, to marry mother, the daughter of a wealthy banker? I already understood his anxious glances, probing my features, and the nocturnal excursions of this man who, wasting his life in the disgusting symbiosis with mother, aspired, at the loftiest behest of the human species, to impart his race to different, worthier loins. Did I really understand? Actually I didn't, and here the enchanting wall of mystery rose again - I knew in theory, but personally I felt no disgust toward mother or father; I was a devoted son. Even today I don't understand it well: being ignorant of theory, I don't know what color is a rat born of a black male and a white female. I only suppose that mine was an exceptional *casus*, an unprecedented case: namely, that the races of my parents, hostile to each other and of equal force, had neutralized themselves within me so perfectly that I am a colorless rat, a rat without any hue! A neutral rat! This is my fate, this is my mystery, this is why I have always been unsuccessful and, participating in everything, I couldn't participate in anything. This is also why I grew apprehensive at the sound of the word "mama's boy" - the more so because it was accompanied by a slight lowering of the eyelids, on which I had already burned myself several times in my life. "A man," she said, puckering up her beautiful eyes, "a man should be daring!" "That's right," I replied. "I can be daring." She indulged in fantasies. She made me jump over ditches and lift weights. "Trample that flowerbed, but not now - make sure the janitor is watching. Crush the bushes, toss that man's hat into the water! Remembering the incident in the schoolyard, I was careful not to patronize her and, anyhow, when I asked her about the reason and cause, she replied that she herself didn't know; that she was an enigma, an element. "I'm a sphinx," she said, "a mystery..." When I failed in something, she was sad, and when I was successful, she was as happy as a child and, as a reward, let me kiss her pretty ear. But she never responded to my "I want you." "There is something about you," she said, embarrassed. "I don't know what, some kind of *abschmak*." I knew full well what that meant.

All this, I admit, was strangely charming, strangely splendid - yes, splendid is the word - but also strangely unconvincing. Still, I didn't lose heart. I read a great deal, especially poetry, and assimilated the language of mystery as best I could. I remember the school essay "Poles and Other Nations." "Of course, it's useless to talk about the superiority of Poles over Negroes and Orientals, who have repulsive skin," I wrote.

"But the superiority of Poles over other European nations is also unquestionable. The Germans - ponderous, brutal, flat-footed; the French - small, diminutive and depraved; the Russians - shaggy; the Italians - *bel canto*. Oh, what a relief to be a Pole, and no wonder everyone envies us and would like to wipe us off the face of the earth. Only Poles do not fill us with disgust." I wrote these words without conviction - but I felt that this was the language of mystery and the very naiveté of my assertions was blissful to me.

### 3

The political horizon darkened and my beloved betrayed a strange excitement. Oh, these great, fantastic September days! They were redolent, as I read in a book, of heather and mint; they were ethereal, bitter, burning and unreal. In the streets - crowds, songs and parades, terror, madness and elation accentuated by the rhythmic step of marching troops. Here - a veteran insurrectionist, tears and blessings. There - mobilization, the parting of

young newlyweds. Everywhere - banners, speeches, outbursts of enthusiasm, the national anthem. Vows, consecrations, tears, posters, indignation, loftiness and hatred. Never before, if one is to believe artists, had women been so lovely. My beloved stopped paying attention to me, her look became deeper and darker, became expressive - but she looked only at military men. I was wondering what to do. All of a sudden, the world of the riddle had intensified incredibly, and I had to be doubly vigilant.

I cheered with the others to express my patriotism and, on several occasions, I even participated in summary execution of spies. I felt, however, that this was a mere palliative. There was something in my Jadwisia's look which made me report for active duty as quickly as possible, and, as a result, I was assigned to the Lancers. And I immediately discovered that I had chosen the right path, for at the appearance before the medical board, standing naked with a piece of paper in hand, in the presence of six clerks and two doctors who had ordered me to lift my foot and inspected my heel, I encountered the same scrutinizing, serious, as if pensive and coldly assessing look of Jadwisia's - and I only wondered that, in the park that day, while accusing me of some inadequacies, she overlooked my heel.

And so - I was a soldier, a lancer, and I sang along with the others: lancers, lancers, children divine, you make many a young lady pine. Yes - although, taken individually, none of us was a child. However, when in a body we were passing through town with that ditty, bent over our horses' necks, with lances and the visors of our caps, an amazingly wonderful smile was playing on the lips of women, and I felt that this time hearts were beating also for me ... Why? - I don't know, for I was still Count Stefan Czarniecki [\[13\]](#) born of a mother née Goldwasser, only in top boots and with raspberry-colored facings on the collar. My mother, exhorting me "not to tolerate it," blessed me before battle with a sacred relic in the presence of the whole staff, of which the maid was the most deeply moved. "Slaughter, set fires, murder!" shouted my mother with inspiration. "Don't spare anyone! You're an instrument of Jehovah's, or rather, I meant to say, the Lord's wrath. You're an instrument of wrath, repulsion, disgust, and hatred. Destroy all those lechers who loathe, although they swore at the altar not to loathe!" And father, an ardent patriot, was weeping on the sidelines. "My son," he said, "you can wash away the blot on your ancestry with blood. Before battle, think always of me and avoid remembering your mother like the plague: this could be your undoing. Think of me and be merciless! No mercy! Destroy all those scoundrels, so all the other races will perish and only my race will remain!" And my beloved offered me her lips for the first time; this was in the park, to the accompaniment a café quartet, on a certain evening redolent of heather and mint - without any preliminaries or explanations, she simply offered me her lips. Poignantly beautiful! I feel like weeping! Today I understand that at issue was a plentiful supply of corpses: since we men had undertaken the slaughter - women, on their part, set to work. But at that time I wasn't yet a bankrupt and this notion, though familiar to me, was no more than a piece of idle philosophy and didn't stop tears flowing from my eyes.

War, sweet war, what kind of lady are you? [\[14\]](#) Forgive me for returning to the mystery which so nags at me. A soldier at the front wallows in mud and flesh; he is oppressed with diseases, ringworm and filth; and, on top of it all, when his belly is ripped apart by a shell, his entrails often come out... How is it, then? Why is a soldier a swallow, and not a frog? Why is the profession of soldier beautiful and revered everywhere? Not beautiful - I didn't express myself well - but splendid, splendid in the

extreme. The fact that it was splendid added to my strength in battle with fear - that loathsome traitor of the soldier's spirit - and I was almost happy, as though I already was on the other side of the impenetrable wall. Every time I managed to hit the target with my carbine, I felt that I was being suspended on the inscrutable smile of women and the measures of a soldier's song; and, after numerous efforts, I even found favor with my horse - that pride of the lancer - which, until then, had only nipped and kicked me.

4

However, an accident occurred that cast me into the abyss of moral depravity from which I still can't extricate myself. Everything was going very well. The war was raging in the whole world together with the Mystery; men drove bayonets into each other's bellies, hated, loathed and despised, loved and worshipped one another; on the spot where a peasant had peacefully threshed grain now lay a heap of rubble. And I joined the others! I had no doubts about how to act and what to choose; tough military discipline was my guidepost to the Mystery. I charged at the enemy or lay in a trench amid asphyxiating gases. Hope, mother of fools, was already unfolding bright prospects for the future before me: how I would return home from the Army, freed once and for all from the fatal neutrality of a rat... But, alas, things took a different turn. . . Cannons roared in the distance . . . Night fell upon the plowed field before us, ragged clouds scudded across the sky, a cold gale whipped us, and we, more splendid than ever, for the past three days had been fiercely defending a small hill with a broken-topped tree on it. Our lieutenant had just ordered us to hold out till the last drop of blood.

Suddenly an artillery shell flies up, bursts, explodes, blows off Lancer Kacperski's both legs, rips apart his belly, and he at first becomes confused, cannot grasp what has happened, and a moment later he also explodes, but with laughter, and also bursts, but into laughter! - holding his belly, blood gushing forth like a fountain, he screams and screams in a humorous, shrill, hysterical, hilarious falsetto - long minutes! What contagious laughter! You have no idea what such an unexpected voice can sound like on the battlefield. I barely managed to survive until the end of the war. And when I returned home, I concluded, my ears still filled with that laughter, that everything I had hitherto lived for had crumbled to dust, that the dreams of a new, happy existence at Jadwisia's side had turned to nothing, and that, on the desert which had suddenly burst open before me, all I could do was to become a communist. Why a communist? But first of all - what do I mean by "communist"? For me, this term carries no specified ideological content, no program, no ballast. To the contrary, I use it rather for what is alien, hostile and incomprehensible in it, and what makes even the most serious individuals shrug their shoulders or let out wild screams of disgust and terror.

But if a program is absolutely necessary, then so be it: I demand and insist that everything - fathers and mothers, race and faith, virtue and fiancées - everything be nationalized and distributed with ration cards in equal and adequate portions. I demand - and maintain this demand in the face of the whole world - that my mother be cut up into tiny bits and given piecemeal to everyone who is not zealous enough in prayer, and that the same thing be done with my father with regard to beings devoid of race. I also demand that all smiles, charms and graces be provided only upon express demand, and



that any unwarranted disgust be punished by incarceration in a correctional institution. So much for the program. As for the method, it consists primarily in squeaky giggling and squinting. With a certain perversity, I contend that the war destroyed all human emotions within me. Further, I declare that, personally, I haven't signed any peace treaty with anyone, and thus - for me - the state of war is not suspended at all. Ha - you will exclaim - the program is unfeasible and the method silly and incomprehensible! Good, but is *your* program more feasible and *your* methods more comprehensible? At any rate, I insist neither on the program nor on the method - and if I chose the term "communism," this was only because "communism" is a mystery as inscrutable to the minds which oppose it as your sulks and smirks are to me.

And so, my ladies and gentlemen, you smile and squint; you caress swallows but torture frogs; you pick fault with a nose; you constantly hate, loathe somebody or plunge into an incomprehensible state of love and rapture - and all for the sake of some Mystery. But what will happen if I also bring myself to create my own mystery and impose it on your world with all the patriotism, heroism and devotion which love and the Army have taught me? What will happen if I smile (a somewhat different smile) and squint with the unceremoniousness of an old warrior? Perhaps I behaved in the wittiest way possible with Jadwisia. "Is woman an enigma?" I asked. (After my return, she greeted me quite effusively, examined my medal, and we immediately went to the park). "Oh yes," she replied. "Don't you find me enigmatic?" she said, lowering her eyelids. "I'm a woman, an element and a sphinx." "I'm also an enigma!" I declared, "I also have my own language of mystery and I demand that you speak it. Do you see that frog? I swear on my honor as a soldier that I'll put it under your blouse if you don't say immediately, quite seriously and looking me straight in the eye, the following words: ciam-bam-biu, minu-mniu, ba-bi, ba-be-no-zar."

She wouldn't do it for anything. She hedged as best she could, explaining that it was silly and unjustified, and that she *couldn't* do it. She blushed scarlet, tried to turn the whole affair into a joke, and finally began to cry. "I can't, I can't," she repeated, sobbing, "I'm ashamed, how could I... such meaningless words!" So I took a huge fat toad and carried out my threat. It seemed that she would go mad. She rolled on the ground like one possessed, and I could compare the squeal she let out only to the humorous scream of the man who'd had both legs and a part of his belly blown off by a shell. It's possible that this comparison and the frog joke are unpalatable, but please remember that I, a colorless rat, a neutral rat, neither white nor black, am also unpalatable to most people. Besides, should the same thing be delicious and splendid to everyone? What seemed to me personally to be the most splendid, the most mysterious and the most redolent of heather and mint in this whole adventure was that - unable to free herself from the toad wreaking havoc under her blouse - she went mad in the end.

Perhaps I'm not a communist, but only a militant pacifist. I roam the world, sail on this abyss of incomprehensible idiosyncrasies and wherever I see some mysterious feeling, whether it be virtue or family, faith or fatherland, I always have to commit some villainy. This is my mystery which I impose on the great riddle of existence. I simply can't pass quietly by a happily engaged couple, a mother and child or a worthy old man - but sometimes I'm overcome with a feeling of grief for you, dear Father and Mother, and for you - O my sainted childhood!

## NOTES

6. *Dieu pardonnera, les hommes...le nez restera* (French): "God will forgive, people will forget, but the nose will remain."

7. *Who are you? ... The White Eagle sole!*: This is a truncated stanza of a Polish patriotic jingle. The White Eagle symbolizes Poland.

8. *Prince Józef Poniatowski* (1796-1813): Polish-born Marshal in the Napoleonic Army and one of the symbols of Polish romanticism. In 1812, he joined Napoleon in his invasion of Russia and distinguished himself at Smolensk, Borodino and Leipzig where, in covering his retreat, he was drowned in the Elster.

9. *Count Zygmunt Krasiński* (1812-1859): Polish playwright and poet, author of the play *Nieboska Komedia* ("The Un-Divine Comedy") - hence the reference to Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

10. *Count Aleksander Fredro* (1793-1876): Polish playwright noted for popular light-hearted comedies-in-verse with a mild satirical slant.

11. *Stanisław Moniuszko* (1813-1872): Composer of operatic works steeped in Polish folklore and history.

12. *Łazienkowski Park*: A romantic landscaped park in Warsaw.

13. *Count Stefan Czarniecki*: The protagonist bears the name of a historic figure, Stefan Czarniecki (1599-1665). Stefan Czarniecki, a national hero, won fame as commander-in-chief during the war with Sweden (1655-1660). The Lancers (or, more exactly, the Uhlans) of the story are the epitome of the Polish romantic tradition, not least due to their interesting paraphernalia, such as resplendent uniforms, lances and *schapskas* (or *chapskas*), i.e. high-crowned, flat-topped and plumed cavalry caps with visors. The song quoted by Gombrowicz, once a popular tune glorifying Polish lancers, fell into oblivion in the second half of the 20th century.

14. *War, sweet war, what kind of lady are you?*: The opening line of a sentimental ditty romanticizing war and the military.

## PREMEDITATED CRIME

by Witold Gombrowicz

Translated from the Polish by Christopher Makosa

Last winter I was obliged to visit the landowner Ignacy K. to settle certain matters of estate. Having gotten several days' leave of absence, I entrusted the assistant magistrate with my duties and sent a wire: "Tuesday, six p.m., carriage, please." However, I arrived at the station and saw no carriage waiting for me. I made inquiries - my telegram had been delivered in good order. The addressee had collected it in person the day before. *Nolens volens* [15] I had to rent a private cart, and load a trunk and a dressing case on it - and in the dressing case I had a small bottle of eau de Cologne, *Vegetal* perfume, an almond-scented toilet soap, a file, and a pair of nail clippers. And so, for four hours I bumped along through the fields at night, in silence, during the thaw. I shivered in my city-style overcoat, stared at the driver's back and, my teeth chattering, thought to myself: how can he expose his back like that! How can he sit with his back turned all the time, often in the wilderness, and be at the mercy of those sitting behind him?!

At last we drew up in front of a wooden country manor - it was dark, only one window, on the second floor, was lighted. I knocked on the door - it was closed; I knocked harder - nothing, quiet. Attacked by watchdogs, I had to beat a hasty retreat to the cart. In turn, my driver began to bang on the door. "These people aren't very hospitable," I thought to myself.

Finally the door opened and revealed a tall, slightly built man of about thirty, with a small blond mustache and a lantern in his hand.

"What is it?" he asked as though roused from sleep, raising the lantern.

"Haven't you received my wire? I'm H."

"H.? What H.?" He demanded, peering into my face. "Go with God," he suddenly said in a low voice, as if he had noticed some identifying mark - he looked away, his hand gripping the lantern even harder. "Go with God, go with God, sir! Good night, and God bless!" he said and withdrew hastily into the house.

This time I said in a harsher tone:

"I'm sorry, sir. Yesterday I sent a telegram announcing my visit. I'm the examining magistrate H. I'd like to see Mr. K.- and if I couldn't come sooner, this was only because no carriage was sent to the station for me."

He moved the lantern aside.

"Yes, that's right," he replied pensively after a moment; my tone had made no impression on him. "That's right... we did receive your wire... you're very welcome."

Now, what did I find out? The young man (who was the owner's son) told me in the anteroom that, quite simply, they had...completely forgotten about my visit and the telegram they had received the previous day in the morning. Explaining myself and apologizing politely for the incursion, I took off my overcoat and hung it up on a peg. He ushered me into a small drawing room where, seeing us, a young woman started from the

sofa with a slight "oh." "This is my sister." "Oh, I'm very pleased to meet you!" I was really very pleased to meet her because there is never any harm in femininity - not even when it involves some hidden intentions. But the hand she offered me was drenched in sweat - since when does a woman offer a man a sweaty hand? - and the femininity itself, despite the charming face, was sort of, I don't know, sweaty and indifferent, devoid of any reaction, slovenly and unkempt.

We sat in old-style red armchairs and started some small talk. However, our preliminary civilities immediately encountered some vague resistance and, rather than flowing freely, the whole conversation proceeded in fits and starts. I: "I'm sure you were surprised to hear someone knocking on the door at this hour?" They: "Knocking? Oh, yes..." I, politely: "I'm really sorry to bother you, but otherwise I'd probably have to ride all over the fields all night long, like Don Quichote, ha, ha!" They (stiffly and quietly, and without finding it proper to respond to my quip with so much as a conventional smile): "Oh, you're very welcome, by all means." What was that all about? It was really strange - it seemed as if they felt offended with me or were afraid of me or pitied me or were ashamed for me... Wedged into their armchairs, they avoided eye contact with me and didn't look at each other, bearing my company with intense annoyance - it seemed that they were absorbed only with themselves and did nothing but shudder at the thought that I might say something insulting. Finally, I became annoyed. What were they afraid of? What was so disturbing about me? What was the meaning of this aristocratic, timid and proud demeanor? However, when I asked about the purpose of my visit, i.e. Mr. K., the brother looked at the sister and the sister at the brother, as though one was waiting for the other to begin. Finally, the brother swallowed hard and said distinctly, distinctly and solemnly, as if it were terribly important: "Yes, he is at home."

It sounded as though he actually wanted to say: "The King, my Father, is at home!"

The supper was also somewhat bizarre. It was served carelessly and not without disdain for the food and for myself. The gusto with which, being hungry, I devoured God's gifts, seemed to scandalize even the solemn-looking butler Szczepan, not to mention the brother and sister, who were listening in silence to the noises I was making over the plate - and you know how hard it is to swallow when somebody is listening: against your will, every morsel falls down your throat with an awful plop. The brother's name was Antoni, and the sister's, Cecylia.

Suddenly I looked up: who was coming in? A deposed queen? No, it was the mother, Mrs. K.: she sailed slowly into the room, offered me her ice-cold hand, gazed at me with a bit of dignified surprise and sat down without a word. She was stout, short and on the plump side - one of those old country matrons who are unyielding about all principles, especially the proprieties - and she looked at me sternly, with utter surprise, as though she had noticed an obscene phrase on my forehead. With her hand Cecylia made a gesture meant either to explain or justify, but her gesture froze halfway and the atmosphere became even more strained and oppressive.

"You must be very unhappy with this...unnecessary trip," said Mrs. K. all of a sudden - but in what tone?! In an aggrieved tone or in the tone of a queen whose subjects have neglected to bow down before her for the third time - as if the eating of pork chops constituted *crimen laesae maiestatis*! [\[16\]](#)

"Your pork chops are delicious!" I replied with anger, for inadvertently I felt increasingly vulgar, foolish and uneasy.

"Our pork chops - our pork chops..."

"Antoni hasn't said anything yet, Mama," Cecylia, who was shy and quiet as a mouse, blurted out all of a sudden.

"What do you mean, he hasn't said anything? What do you mean, he hasn't said anything? You *really* haven't said anything yet?"

"What's that for, Mama?" Antoni whispered, turned pale and clenched his teeth, as though he was about to sit in a dentist's chair.

"Antoni..."

"But why...why bother? It doesn't matter...what's the point - there'll always be time for it," he said and fell silent.

"Antoni, how can you, how... what do you mean, there's no point?"

"It doesn't... doesn't matter..."

"Poor baby!" whispered the mother, smoothing his hair; but he thrust her arm away brusquely.

"My husband," she announced dryly, addressing me, "has passed away tonight."

What...?! He's dead? Oh, so that's what it's all about! I stopped eating - put aside the knife and fork - and quickly swallowed the morsel of food I had in my mouth. How could it possibly happen? After all, he collected the telegram at the station as recently as yesterday! I looked at them: all three of them waited with an air of modesty and solemnity, though with set and hard faces and pursed lips; they waited stiffly - what were they waiting for? Oh, yes - I had to offer my condolences!

It happened so unexpectedly that I completely lost my poise at first. Embarrassed, I rose from the chair and mumbled indistinctly something like: "I'm very sorry...my sympathies...pardon me." I fell silent, but they still didn't react to it; for them it was still too little. They stood without a word, with downcast eyes, impassive faces and in sloppy clothes: he was unshaven, they were unkempt and their fingernails dirty. I cleared my throat, casting frantically around for something appropriate to say, for a proper phrase, but my mind, as you may imagine, was a massive void, a desert - and they waited, stricken with grief. They waited without looking at me - Antoni drummed his fingers lightly on the tabletop, Cecylia plucked shyly at the hem of her soiled dress, and the mother stood motionless, as though petrified, with the stern unyielding expression of a matron. I felt bad, even though I had handled hundreds of death cases as an examining magistrate. However...how shall I put it - an ugly murdered dead person covered with a quilt is one thing, and a respectable person lying in state, who has died a death of natural causes, quite another; a certain unceremoniousness is one thing and an honest death, a death accustomed to deference, to good manners, a death, so to speak, displayed in its full majesty, is quite another thing. No, let me repeat: I wouldn't have felt so confused if they had immediately told me everything. But they were too embarrassed. They were too afraid. I don't know if this was simply because I was an intruder or perhaps because, under these circumstances, they felt somewhat ashamed because of the official nature of my job, due to a certain...matter-of-fact approach, which I must have acquired through the years of practice; but, in any case, their shame somehow made me awfully ashamed - in fact, it made me inordinately ashamed.

I stammered something about the attachment and respect I felt for the deceased. Remembering that I hadn't seen him since my schooldays, of which they might have known, I added: "during my schooldays." Since they still didn't respond - and, after all,

somehow I had to bring the matter to an end, get it over with - for want of anything better to say, I asked: "May I see the corpse?" - but somehow the word "corpse" sounded highly inappropriate. Apparently, my embarrassment appeased the widow - she mournfully burst into tears and offered me her hand, which I kissed with humility.

"Tonight," she said, half-conscious, "tonight ... I get up in the morning... come into the room... call - Ignacy - Ignacy - no answer, then I see him lying... I fainted... fainted... And my hands have been shaking all the time ever since - look at that!"

"What's the point, Mama?"

"They're shaking... shaking all the time," she said, raising her arms.

"Mama," Antoni, off to one side, said once more in an undertone.

"They're shaking, shaking - look: they're shaking like leaves..."

"It doesn't... doesn't matter... who cares? For shame!" he blurted out brutally and, wheeling suddenly around, walked away. "Antoni!" the mother exclaimed in terror.

"Cecylia, go after him..." And I remained standing, stared at the shaking hands, had absolutely nothing to say and felt increasingly confused and embarrassed.

All of a sudden, the widow said quietly: "You wanted... let's go, then... upstairs... I'll show you the way." Today, while reviewing the matter with detachment, essentially I believe I had the right to enjoy myself and the pork chops at that time - that is, I could or actually should have replied: "I'm at your service - but let me finish the pork chops first because I haven't had anything to eat since noon." It's possible that if I had said so, the course of many a tragic event would have been changed. But was it my fault that she had terrorized me to such an extent that my pork chops, as well as yours truly, seemed trivial and unworthy of mention? And, all of a sudden, I felt so ashamed that the mere thought of that shame makes me blush to this day.

On the way to the second floor, where the deceased lay, the widow whispered to herself: "Appalling misfortune... what a blow, what a terrible blow... The children didn't say anything. They're proud, difficult, secretive, they won't reveal their secrets to any stranger, they'd rather worry themselves sick in solitude. They take after me, after me... Oh, I'm afraid Antoni might hurt himself! He's so tough and uncompromising that he even hates to see my hands shake. He didn't let anyone touch the body - but after all, we have to do something, give some instructions. He didn't cry, didn't cry at all... Oh, if he had only shed a single tear!"

She pushed open some door - and I had to kneel with bent head and concentration on my face, while she was standing off to one side, solemn and motionless, as though she was holding the Holy Sacrament.

The deceased lay in bed - just as he had died - the only difference being that he had been laid up on his back. The livid, swollen face bore witness to death by suffocation, as is usually the case with heart attacks.

"He was strangled," I whispered, even though I knew perfectly well that he had died of a heart attack.

"It was the heart, sir, the heart... He died of a heart attack..."

"Well, sometimes the heart can turn into a strangler... believe me..." I said glumly. As she was still waiting, I crossed myself and said a prayer; and then (she was still waiting), I said quietly:

"Look at that dignified face!"

Her hands began to shake so violently that I thought it would probably be proper to

kiss them once more. She didn't react with the slightest stir, standing on like a cypress [17], staring sorrowfully at some point on the wall - and the longer she stood like that, the more difficult it was for me not to show her a little kindness. It was required by common decency, so I couldn't avoid it. I rose from my knees, needlessly flicked some speck of dust off my clothes, coughed quietly - while she remained standing. Rumpled, slovenly, she stood with ardor, in silence, looking on, like Niobe, with a fixed stare, her eyes focused on memories, and a small drop appeared at the tip of her nose, and dangled, dangled...like the sword of Damocles [18] - and the candles smoked. After a few minutes, I tried to say something quietly - she sprang up as if something had bitten her, made a few steps forward and stopped again. I knelt. What an unbearable situation! What a dilemma for somebody so sensitive and, above all, so touchy as myself! Although I didn't suspect her of deliberate malice, no one could deny that there was malice in it. Nobody could convince me that there wasn't! It wasn't her - it was her malice which impudently delighted in my mincing around before her and the corpse.

Kneeling two paces from that corpse, the first I couldn't touch, I stared blankly at the quilt, which covered it smoothly up to its armpits, and at the hands, which lay neatly folded on the quilt - there were potted plants at the foot of the bed, and the face emerged faintly from the depression of the pillow. I looked now at the flowers and then at the face of the deceased, but nothing was coming to my mind, except for the strangely intrusive thought that I was watching some stage-managed theatrical scene. Everything seemed to have been staged: there - the corpse, proud, untouchable, its indifferent closed eyes focused on the ceiling; beside it - the mournful widow; here - I, the examining magistrate, kneeling like a savage muzzled dog. "What would happen if I got up, approached the corpse, pulled the quilt off of it and examined it - if I could at least touch it - touch it with the tip of my finger." This is what I thought - but the solemn integrity of death nails us to the spot, while grief and virtue prevent us from sacrilege. Get away! Forbidden! Hands off! On your knees! "What is this?" I thought slowly, "who staged it like that? I'm an ordinary, common man - I'm not suited for such histrionics...I wouldn't advise anyone...Damn!" I suddenly lapsed into thought. "What nonsense! Where did I get that idea? Am I playacting? Where did I pick up such artificiality, affectation - after all, on the whole I'm completely different - did I catch that from them? What is this - since I came here, all my actions have been affected and pretentious, as though performed by a poor actor. I've completely lost myself in this house and I'm playacting horribly." "Hmm," I whispered, but again not without a certain theatrical pose (as though I was already drawn into the play and couldn't return to normality), "I wouldn't advise anyone...I wouldn't advise anyone to make a demon of me because I might be willing to accept the challenge..." Meanwhile, the widow had wiped her nose and made for the door, saying something to herself, clearing her throat and gesticulating.

When I finally found myself alone in my room, I removed my collar [19] and, instead of putting it on the table, flung it on the ground, and then trampled it under foot. My face contorted and flushed with blood, and my fist clenched tightly in a way that was quite unexpected to me. Obviously, I was furious. "They've made a fool of me." I whispered. "That madwoman...they arranged everything so cleverly. They want me to pay homage to themselves - and to kiss their hands! They demand affection from me! Affection! They want me to pussyfoot with them! But I, shall we say, hate that. And I, shall we say, hate being forced to kiss someone's shaking hands; I hate being compelled to utter prayers,

kneel, make unnatural and disgustingly ingratiating sounds; but, above all, I hate tears, sighs and a drop dangling from a nose; on the contrary, I like neatness and order."

"Hmm," I cleared my throat pensively after a pause, but in a different tone - cautious and tentative, as it were, "so they want me to kiss their hands? I should kiss their feet because it's clear what I am in comparison with the majesty of death and this familial grief...? Nothing but a vulgar, soulless police sleuth - my true nature has come to light. But ...hmm... I don't know if they aren't too rash; yes, in their place, I would be slightly more careful ...a little more modest...because they should probably take my odious character into consideration, and even if not my...private character, then...then... at least my official character. They've overlooked that. In any case, I am, after all, an examining magistrate and there is, after all, a corpse here, and the idea of a corpse is somehow associated - and not very innocently at that - with that of an examining magistrate. And what would I discover," I thought slowly, "if I considered the course of events, for example, from the viewpoint...hmm...of an examining magistrate?"

"Here you are: a visitor arrives, who - by coincidence - happens to be an examining magistrate. The people he came to see don't send the carriage for him and don't open the door - so they're making things difficult for him and are anxious not to let him into the house. Then they receive him reluctantly, with ill-masked anger, with apprehension - but why be afraid, why become angry at the sight of an examining magistrate? They conceal and hold back something from him - and eventually it turns out that what they conceal is ... a dead man who has died of strangulation in a room upstairs. That's ugly! And when the corpse is exposed they do their best to force him to kneel and kiss their hands on the pretext that the deceased has died a death of natural causes!"

Those who would call this idea absurd or even ridiculous (for, to be frank, how can anyone stretch the truth to such an extent?) shouldn't forget that I trampled my collar in anger a moment ago - my sanity was limited and my senses blunted by the offense I had taken, and so it was clear that I couldn't take full responsibility for my follies.

Looking straight ahead, I said solemnly:  
"Something isn't right here."

And I began, with all my acumen, to piece together the chain of facts, form syllogisms [\[20\]](#), gather up the threads and seek circumstantial evidence. But soon, tired of the futility of my exertions, I fell asleep. "Yes, yes... the majesty of death is definitely worthy of respect and no one can claim that I didn't pay it due honors - yet not all deaths are equally majestic and, before this situation gets clarified, I wouldn't be so self-confident in their place, especially since the case is murky, complex and dubious ... hmm ... hmm... as indicated by all the circumstantial evidence."

The next day in the morning, drinking coffee in bed, I noticed that a young manservant - a stocky, drowsy-looking boy - was glancing at me with a faint glimmer of curiosity while stoking the furnace. I was sure he knew who I was - and so I struck up a conversation with him:

"So your Master died?"

"He sure did."

"Say, how many servants are there here?"

"Not including myself, there's Szczepan and the cook, sir. Including myself, there's three people."

"The Master died in the room upstairs?"



"He sure died upstairs," he said indifferently, feeding the fire and ballooning his fleshy cheeks.

"And where do you people sleep?"

He stopped blowing and looked at me - but this time he gave me a sharp look.

"Szczepan and the cook sleep next to the kitchen, and I sleep in the servants' quarters."

"You mean you can pass into the rooms from the place where Szczepan and the cook sleep only through the servants' quarters?" I went on asking him with a casual air.

"There ain't no other way," he answered, and now gave an utterly sharp look.

"And the Mistress, where does she sleep?"

"The Mistress used to sleep with the Master - and now she sleeps next to the Master, in the other room."

"Since the Master died?"

"Oh no, she moved out way before that, about a week ago."

"You wouldn't know why the Mistress moved out of the Master's room?"

"How should I know that..."

I asked him one more question:

"And where does the young Master sleep?"

"Downstairs, next to the dining room."

I got up and dressed with care. "Hmm ... hmm ... So, unless I'm mistaken, there is one more telltale piece of circumstantial evidence - an interesting detail." At any rate, one wondered why the wife abandoned the master bedroom one week before her husband's death. Was she afraid to contract a heart disease? That would have been an inordinate fear, to put it mildly. Only no premature conclusions, no hasty moves - and I went down into the dining room. The widow was standing by the window - her hands clasped, she was staring at the coffee cup - she whispered something monotonously, fervently shaking her head, a wet handkerchief in her hands. When I approached her, she suddenly began to pace around the table in the opposite direction, still whispering and waving her one arm about as if she were insane. However, I had already recovered the poise I had lost the day before and, standing aside, waited patiently for her to notice me at last.

"Oh, good-bye, good-bye, sir," she said unthinkingly, seeing me bow. "It's been very nice meeting you..."

"Excuse me," I whispered, "I ... I ... am not leaving yet. I'd like to stay on a little longer..."

"Oh, it's you...", she said. She hinted that the body should be removed from the house and even favored me with the feeble question: "Would you stay for the funeral?"

"I esteem it a great honor," I replied piously. How could I refuse to pay my last respects to the dead man? "Would you mind if I saw the body once more?" I asked. Without replying or looking back to see if I was following her, she mounted the creaky stairs.

After a brief prayer I rose and, as though contemplating the riddle of life and death, looked around. "Strange!" I said to myself, "interesting!" Judging by appearances, the man had undoubtedly died a death of natural causes. Although his face was swollen and livid, like that of a strangled person, there were neither any signs of violence on the body nor in the room. In fact, one could assume that he had peacefully died of a heart attack. Despite that, however, I suddenly approached the bed and touched the corpse's neck with my finger.

This slight move had an electrifying effect on the widow. She sprang up.

"What're you doing?" she shouted. "What're you doing? What're you doing?"

"Poor lady, don't get upset like that," I replied, and without further ceremony carried out a detailed examination of the corpse's neck and of the whole room! Ceremonies are good only up to a point! We wouldn't go very far if ceremoniousness got in the way of making a detailed examination, when required. Alas! - there were literally neither any traces on the body nor on top of the commode; neither behind the wardrobe nor on the small rug before the bed. The only noteworthy thing was an enormous dead cockroach. However, a certain clue appeared in the widow's face - she stood motionless, watching me with an air of vague terror.

I therefore asked her as guardedly as possible: "Why did you move into your daughter's room a week ago?"

"Me? Why? Me? Why did I move? How do you ... my son persuaded me ... so there would be more fresh air. My husband was suffocating at night ... but why did you...? Actually why are you ... what are you...?"

"Please forgive me... I'm sorry - but..." - and, rather than finishing the sentence, I lapsed into meaningful silence.

She revealed a certain understanding - as if she had suddenly grasped the fact that I was talking to her in my official capacity.

"But, after all ... what do you mean? After all ... after all, you ... you haven't found anything?"

Clearly, there was a note of fear in her voice. Instead of answering, I cleared my throat. "Anyway," I said dryly, "I'd like to ask you...I believe you said something about removing the body...Well, I must ask you to leave the body in the house until tomorrow morning."

"Oh, Ignacy!" she exclaimed.

"Exactly!" I replied.

"Oh, Ignacy! What do you mean? That's impossible, I can't do that," she declared, giving the corpse a blank stare. "Oh, Ignacy!"

And - how interesting! - she suddenly broke off, stiffened, squashed me with a look, and left the room deeply offended. A question - why take offense? Why did she take the violent death of her husband as a personal insult, when she had nothing to do with that death? What's so insulting about violent death? It may be an insult to the murderer, but certainly not to the dead person or his relatives! But, for the time being, I had something more urgent to do than ask such rhetorical questions. Left alone with the corpse, I once more began to conduct a detailed examination: but the longer I conducted it, the more surprised I was. "Not a thing!" I whispered, "nothing but the cockroach behind the commode." One could really assume that there were no grounds for further action.

Ha! There was a problem with the corpse which, as every professional could see, attested loudly and clearly to the fact that it had died of an ordinary heart attack. All outward appearances - the absence of a carriage, the reluctance to cooperate, the fear, the concealment - testified to a vague something, while the corpse, staring at the ceiling, declared: I died of a heart attack! It was a physical and medical certainty, a sure thing - no one murdered him for the simple and conclusive reason that *he was not murdered at all*. I had to admit that most of my colleagues would have discontinued the inquest at that point. But not me! I already looked too ridiculous, was too vindictive and had already gone too far. I lifted my finger and knit my brows: crime does not occur of its own

accord, gentlemen, crime must be worked out in the mind, thought out, thought up - nobody will give you the murder weapon on a silver platter. "When appearances militate against crime," I said wisely, "let's be cunning and let's not be fooled by appearances. But when, on the contrary, logic, sound judgment or, indeed, hard evidence become the criminal's advocate, and when appearances speak against him, let's trust appearances and let's not allow logic and evidence lead us up the garden path." Good...but, appearances notwithstanding, how - as Dostoevski says - do you make a roast rabbit without a rabbit?

[21] I was staring at the corpse, and the corpse was staring at the ceiling, denying all allegations of violence on the ground of its inviolate neck. That was the difficulty! That was the hitch! But if you can't remove a hurdle, you have to jump over it - *hic Rhodus, hic salta!* [22] Could that inanimate object with human features, which I could take in my hand if I wanted to - could that frozen face put up real resistance to my mobile, changeable features that were capable of finding an expression suitable for every situation? And while the visage of the corpse remained the same - calm but somewhat swollen - my face expressed solemn cunning, foolish conceit and self-assurance, exactly as if I wanted to say: I'm an old fox and won't let anyone fool me!

"Yes," I said with solemnity, "the obvious fact is: the deceased was strangled."

It's possible that a devious defense attorney might try to argue that the decedent was suffocated by a heart attack. Hmm, hmm... I'm not going to fall for such legal ploys. The heart is a highly expansible and even symbolic term. Who would be happy to hear, on the sensational news of a crime, that it was nothing - that the man was suffocated by the heart? Excuse me, what heart? We know how complex and multi-faceted the heart can be; oh, the heart is a carryall that can carry a great deal - the cold heart of a murderer; the flinty heart of a libertine; the faithful heart of a mistress; a warm heart, an ungrateful heart, a jealous heart, an envious heart, etc.

The trampled cockroach seemed to bear no direct relation to the crime. So far, I had established one thing: the deceased had been strangled, and the strangulation was of a cardiac type. I could also say that, judging by the lack of bodily injuries, the strangulation was definitely internal in nature. Yes, that was all... internal and cardiac - no more. No premature conclusions - and now it would be a good idea to snoop around the house a little bit.

I returned downstairs. When I entered the dining room, I heard the sound of light, hurrying footsteps - could it be Miss Cecylia K.? Hey, it's no good running away, young lady - truth will always find you out! Having passed the dining room - the servants, who were laying the table for dinner, glanced at me furtively - I slowly ventured into the other rooms, noticing Antoni's receding back somewhere in the doorway. "As regards an internal death of a cardiac type," I mused, "I have to admit that this old house is more suitable for it than any other. Strictly speaking, there may be nothing explicitly incriminating here - however..." I sniffed, "however... there is panic and some smell in the air, a peculiar smell - the kind of smell you can stand so long as it's your own, like the smell of sweat - a smell I would describe as the smell of familial affection..." Still sniffing, I made a mental note of certain minute details which, though tiny, didn't seem completely irrelevant. For example: faded, yellowed sheer curtains - hand-embroidered pillows - a large number of art photographs and portraits - chair seats bearing the imprint of the posteriors of many a generation... and besides: a discontinued letter on white lined paper - a dab of butter on a knife, on the sill in the drawing room - a glass of medicine on

the commode - a blue ribbon behind the furnace - a cobweb, numerous wardrobes - old-house smells... All this combined to create an atmosphere of particular solicitude, great cordiality - here, the heart found nourishment for itself at every step; yes, the heart could indulge in the old butter, the sheer curtains, the ribbon, and the odors (and bread makes us self-indulgent, I've noticed). Moreover, I had to admit that the character of the house was exceptionally "internal," a fact which revealed itself primarily in the cotton stuffed in the windows and in the chipped saucer with a dried-up slice of fly poison, left over from the summer.

However, in order to forestall any possible allegations that, due to a strong inclination toward some internal direction, I ignored all other options, I took the trouble of checking if indeed there was no passage from the service rooms into the living quarters other than through the servants' quarters - and I established that there wasn't. I even stepped outside and slowly, at an ostensibly relaxed pace, went around the house, walking through sodden snow. It seemed impossible for any stranger to get inside at night through the door or through the windows, which were fitted with huge shutters. Therefore, if any act was committed in that house at night, there was nobody I could suspect - with the possible exception of Stefan, the young manservant who was sleeping in the servants' quarters. "Yes," I said shrewdly, "it must have been Stefan, especially since he has a conniving look in his eyes."

So saying, I pricked up my ears, for a voice reached me through a half-open small window; a voice which was completely different from the one I had heard some time ago; a delightful, promising voice which had nothing in common with a mournful queen and was racked by anxiety and terror; a tremulous, feeble, feminine voice which seemed to cheer me up and suited me fine. "Cecylia, Cecylia... look out the window... is he gone yet? Look out! Don't lean forward, don't lean forward - he may notice you! He may come over here - snoop around - did you put away the linen? What's he looking for? What did he find? Oh, Ignacy! Oh God, what did he inspect that furnace for, what did he want with the commode? Oh, it's horrible, all over the whole house! Me, I don't care, with me he can do whatever he wants, *but Antoni, Antoni won't stand that!* For him it's sacrilege! He turned pale so terribly when I told him about it - *oh, I'm afraid he might not be strong enough.*"

"However, if the crime was internal in nature, a fact which may be deemed to have been established during the inquest (I went on thinking) - then I'm obliged to admit that the murder committed by the young manservant, probably for the purpose of robbery, can in no way be regarded as a crime of an internal type. Suicide is a whole different matter - it's different when one kills oneself and everything goes on inside - and so is parricide where, in any case, it's the victim's own flesh and blood which does the killing. As for the cockroach, the murderer must have killed it carried away by the momentum."

Thinking such thoughts, I sat down in the study with a cigarette - when suddenly Mr. Antoni K. entered. He greeted me when he saw me, although he did so a little more modestly than the first time; he even seemed somewhat distressed.

"It's a beautiful house you've got," I said. "It's remarkably peaceful in here, so cozy - that's what I call a real family home - it exudes such warmth... it reminds me of childhood, my mother, my mother in a robe, bitten fingernails, a missing handkerchief..." "This house? This house... certainly... there are mice in here. But that's not the point. My mother tells me - I hear you ...I mean..."

"I know an excellent remedy for mice - Ratopex."

"Oh! - And...?"

"Oh, I really have to crack down on them with greater vigor - much greater vigor... I hear this morning you went to see ... Father ... I mean, pardon me - the body ..."

"Yes, I did."

"Oh - And ...?"

"And? And - what?"

"I hear you ... found something there..."

"Oh, yes - I found a dead cockroach."

"There are many dead cockroaches, too ... I mean - cockroaches ... I mean - cockroaches that are not dead."

"Did you love your father very much?" I asked, picking up from the table an album with photos of Kraków.

My question clearly took him by surprise. No, he wasn't prepared for it; he hung his head, looked away, swallowed hard - and muttered with enormous constraint, almost with repulsion:

"Well enough..."

"Well enough? That's not very much. Well enough! That's it?"

"Why did you ask me that?" he demanded in a stifled voice.

"Why are you so affected?" I replied with sympathy, stooping close toward him paternally, with the album in my hands.

"Me - affected? How did you...?"

"Why did you turn pale now?"

"Me? Me - turn pale?"

"Well, look at you! You're glowering at me... you're not finishing your sentences... you're babbling about mice, cockroaches... your voice is now too loud, now too soft, either hoarse or so shrill that it pierces my ears...," I went on seriously, "and you're making such nervous gestures... but then, all of you are, sort of - nervous and affected. Why is it like that, young man? Wouldn't you be better off mourning in a straightforward manner? Hmm... you loved him... well enough?! But why did you make your mother leave your father's bedroom a week ago?"

Completely paralyzed by my words and not daring to move his arm or leg, he barely managed to stutter out:

"Me? What do you mean, why? Father... Father needed... fresh air..."

"Were you sleeping in your room downstairs that night?"

"Me? Naturally, in the room...in the room downstairs..."

I cleared my throat and went to my room, leaving him in his small chair with hands on his knees, with lips tightly compressed and with legs pushed stiffly together. Hmm - obviously he was a nervous person. Nervous, shy, excessively tender, excessively emotional... However, I still kept my emotions in check, for I didn't want to scare away anyone or anything ahead of time. While I was washing hands and getting ready for dinner, Stefan, the young manservant, slipped into my room and asked if I needed anything. He looked like a man reborn! His eyes flitted around, his body language bespoke servile cunning, and all of his spiritual powers were excited in the extreme! I asked: "So what else is new?"

He replied in one breath: "You asked me if I was sleeping in the servants' quarters on

the night before last... I just wanna say that, that evening, the young Master locked the door to the servants' quarters on the side of the dining room." I asked: "Had the Master never locked that door before?" "Never, ever. He locked it only then and, besides, I'm sure he thought I was asleep, 'cause it was late - but I wasn't asleep yet, and I heard him approach the door and lock it. I don't know when he unlocked the door, 'cause I was asleep - he waked me up at dawn and told me our Master was dead, but the door was unlocked by then."

Thus, for no apparent reason, the son of the deceased locked the door to the servants' quarters in the night! He locked the door to the servants' quarters - what could it possibly mean?

"Please don't tell anybody I told you that, sir."

I had good reason, then, to refer to that death as internal! The door had been locked, so that no stranger would enter! The snare was becoming increasingly tight and I could better see the noose tightening around the murderer's neck. But why, rather than exulting in triumph, I only smiled a somewhat foolish smile? For, alas, I had to admit that I didn't have something at least as important as the noose around the murderer's neck, i.e. the noose around the neck of the deceased. Even though I had naively jumped over that obstacle by ignoring the inviolate white neck, I couldn't justify my behavior by heat of passion alone. Very well, I admit (off the record), I was furious; for some reason, hatred, repulsion and resentment had blinded me and made me insist on a flagrant absurdity - that's human and everyone would understand that. However, a time will come when I will have to settle down - Judgment Day, as the Holy Bible says, shall come. And then... hmm... I will say: "This is the murderer," while the corpse will say: "I died of a heart attack." And then what? What will the Judge say?

Let's assume that the Judge says: "You allege that the deceased was murdered? Based on what evidence?"

I will reply: "Because his family, Your Honor, his wife and children, and especially his son, behaved suspiciously, as though they had murdered him - no question about it." "Very well, but how could he possibly have been murdered, when he was *not* murdered - when experts on forensic medicine demonstrated in their report, beyond reasonable doubt, that he had simply died of a heart attack?"

And then that mercenary shyster, the defense attorney, will rise and, flapping the sleeves of his robe, will proceed to prove in a long speech that it was a misunderstanding stemming from my primitive way of thinking, that I confused crime with mourning - for that which I mistook for a manifestation of an unclear conscience was but a sign of the fearfulness of affection, which eludes and shrinks from the cold touch of a stranger. And the unbearable, exasperating refrain will recur - how could he possibly have been murdered, when he was *not* murdered at all and the body bore no trace of strangulation?

This problem weighed on my mind to such an extent that - simply for my own sake, to relieve distress and gnawing doubts, without any other intentions - I began to prove at dinner that, in its essence, crime was not a physical, but a psychological phenomenon *par excellence*. Unless I'm mistaken, I was the only person to speak. Antoni didn't utter a single word: I don't know if he believed, as he had the previous evening, that I was unworthy of conversation or if he was afraid he might sound a little hoarse. The widow sat solemn and still seemed deeply insulted, while her hands were shaking in an attempt to secure impunity for themselves. Miss Cecylia K. was quietly sipping her too-hot drink.

Inspired by the above-mentioned motives, unaware of the blunder I was making or of certain tensions in the atmosphere, I spoke eloquently, long and with panache. "Believe me, ladies and gentlemen, the physical shape of a criminal act - a mangled body, disorder in the room, all so-called trace clues - is but a minor detail or, strictly speaking, a mere addition to the crime proper, a forensic and legal formality, the murderer's bow toward the authorities. The crime proper is always committed in the soul. External details... my God! Let me relate the following incident to you: for no apparent reason, a nephew suddenly drives... a long old-fashioned hatpin into the back of his uncle, who has been showering him with favors for the last thirty years! There you have it! - such a great psychological crime, and such a small indiscernible physical trace: a tiny hole in the back from a pinprick. In order to justify his deed, the nephew later contended that, due to distraction, he had mistaken his uncle's back for his cousin's hat. Who would believe him?

Yes, yes, from the physical point of view, crime is a trifle; spiritually, however, it's a truly difficult matter. Due to the remarkable fragility of the human body, a person can commit a murder, like that nephew, by accident, due to distraction: bang! - and suddenly, goodness knows how, a dead body falls to the ground.

In the middle of a honeymoon, a certain highly respectable woman, head over heels in love with her husband, notices an oblong white bug among the raspberries on her husband's plate - and it should be noted that the husband loathed those hideous caterpillars above everything else. Rather than warning him, she looks on with an arch smile and says: "You just ate a bug."

"No," shouts the husband, terrified.

"Oh, yes," says the wife and proceeds to describe it - it was such and such, plump, white. There is plenty of laughing and bantering going on; the husband, in mock anger, raises his arms heavenward, complaining about his wife's malice. They forget the whole affair. And after a week or two, the wife is greatly surprised when the husband loses weight, withers, throws up all meals, abhors his own hand and leg, and (pardon the expression) at first bows to the porcelain God on and off - and then, one might say, on and still on. A growing repulsion toward one's own body - what a dreadful affliction! One day there is a great deal of weeping, frightful moaning, he suddenly dies after throwing up his guts - in fact, only his head and throat remain because he vomits the rest into a pail. The widow is in despair - and it turns out on cross-examination that, in the innermost depths of her being, she felt a morbid passion for a powerful bulldog, which her husband had whipped shortly before eating the raspberries.

Or in a certain aristocratic family, the son murdered his mother by repeating the annoying phrase "sit down, please!" over and over again. Throughout the judicial proceedings, he protested his innocence right up to the end. Oh, it's so easy to commit a crime that one wonders why so many people die a death of natural causes... especially when the heart comes into play, the heart - that secret link between people, that subterranean, tortuous conduit between you and me, that suction and force pump, which can wonderfully suck you and perfectly pump you dry... And when all is over, we go through the rigmarole of mourning, funereal faces, the dignity of grief, the majesty of death - ha, ha - all of them designed to induce us to "pay our respects" to suffering, but by no means to probe into the heart, which has cruelly murdered on the sly."

They sat in perfect silence, not daring to interrupt! - where was that pride from the

night before? Suddenly the widow, deathly pale, her hands trembling with a redoubled force, threw down the napkin and rose from the table. I spread my hands, saying: "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I was only talking in a general way about the heart, about the chamber of the heart in which it's so easy to conceal a corpse."

"You scoundrel!" she exclaimed, her bosom undulating heavily. The son and the daughter started from the table.

"What about the door!" I exclaimed. "Fine - call me a scoundrel! But please tell me: why was the door locked that night?!"

A pause. Suddenly Cecylia burst into nervous wailing sobs and says:

"The door - that wasn't Mama. I locked it! It was me!"

"That's not true, daughter, *I* ordered the door locked! Why are you demeaning yourself before that man?"

"You gave the order, but I wanted...I wanted...I also wanted to lock the door and it was I who locked it."

"Excuse me," I said, "hold on a minute...What're you saying? - (after all, it was Antoni who had locked the door to the servants' quarters)"... Which door are we talking about?"

"The door... the door to Papa's bedroom... *I* locked it!"

"It was I who locked it... I forbid you to say that, you hear? *I* gave the order!"

How could it possibly happen?! So the women also locked the door? On the night the father was to die, the son locked the door to the servants' quarters, while mother and daughter locked the door to their room!

"And why did you, ladies, lock that door?" I demanded vehemently. "Why exactly that night? What was the reason?"

Consternation! Silence! They didn't know! They hung their heads! A theatrical scene. Agitated, Antoni suddenly said: "Aren't you ashamed to explain yourselves before him? Be quiet! Let's leave here!"

"Then perhaps you will tell me why you locked the door to the servants' quarters that night, blocking the servants' passage into the rooms?"

"Me? Me - lock the door?"

"What, I suppose you didn't then? There are witnesses! That can be proved!"

Another silence! More consternation! The women looked on with terror. At last the son, as though recalling something that happened a long time ago, announced soundlessly:

"Yes, I did lock that door!"

"But why - why did you lock it? Was it because of drafts?"

"I can't explain that," he said with indescribable haughtiness - and left the room.

I spent the remainder of the day in my room. Without lighting the candle, I paced up and down a long time, from wall to wall. Outside, the twilight murk was deepening - patches of snow stood out more and more visibly against the falling shadow of night, while the house was beset by the tangled skeletons of trees on all sides. What a house that was! The house of murderers, a monstrous house with a cold-blooded, masked, premeditated murderer on the prowl; the house of stranglers! The heart?! I knew right away what to expect from that well-fed heart and what parricide that heart, swollen from fat, butter and familial warmth, could commit! I knew it, but didn't want to reveal it ahead of time! Oh, the way they were putting on airs! They expected me to pay homage to them! Affection? They'd better say why they locked the doors!



But why - now that I had all the threads in my hand and could point my finger at the criminal - was I wasting time instead of taking action? There was a hitch, a hitch - the white intact neck - and the darker it was, the whiter the neck became, like that snow outside. Evidently, the corpse was in league with a gang of murderers. Once again, I summoned up my strength and attacked the corpse up front, head on - calling a spade a spade and clearly pointing my finger at the murderer. It was like fighting a chair. No matter how hard I strained my imagination, intuition and logic, the neck remained a neck and the whiteness the same whiteness, with the characteristic stubbornness of an inanimate object. Therefore, all I could do was to playact right up to the end and remain in a state of vindictive blindness and absurdity, and wait, expecting naively that, if the corpse was unwilling, then maybe the crime, like oil in water, would rise to the surface of its own accord. Was I lazing around? Yes, but the house echoed with the sound of my footsteps, everyone could hear me pacing back and forth, and surely they, down there, weren't idling away the time.

Supper time had passed. It was approaching eleven o'clock, but I didn't budge from my room; instead, I hurled abuse at them, calling them a pack of rogues and criminals. I felt triumphant and trusted deep down inside, with the last remnants of my strength, that my stubbornness and perseverance would be rewarded - that, after all, something must give after all these endeavors, these various facial expressions and this passion; that in the end, all resistance would be overcome; that, tense and driven to extremity, the situation will somehow resolve itself and give rise to something - something real rather than fictitious. After all, we couldn't remain like that for ever: I - upstairs and they - downstairs; someone had to give up, and it was only a question of who would give up first. It was quiet and gloomy. I stepped out into the hall, but heard no sounds from downstairs. What were they doing down there? Were they at least doing what they were obliged to do? Were they sufficiently scared, now that I exulted over that locked door? Were they huddling on what to do? Were they listening for the sound of my footsteps? Weren't they too lazy to work that out within themselves? "Ah," I sighed with relief when, about midnight, I finally heard someone walk through the hall and knock on the door.

"Come in," I called out.

"Pardon me," said Antoni, sitting in the chair I pointed him to. He looked unwell - his face was sallow and pale - and I could see that clarity of speech wouldn't be his forte.

"Your behavior... and recently - those words... in a word - what's the meaning of this!? Either leave... and at once!... or tell me! This is blackmail!" he burst out.

"So you're asking me at last," I said. "Too late, though! And you're asking me in a very general way, too. Actually, what am I supposed to say? Very well, then - here goes: your father..."

"What? What about him?"

"Your father was strangled."

"Strangled. Fine. Strangled," he snorted angrily with some strange satisfaction.

"Are you glad?"

"Yes, I am."

I waited awhile, and then said:

"Do you have any other questions?"

He burst out:

"But, after all, nobody heard any cries or noises!"

"First of all, only your mother and sister, who had locked their door for the night, were sleeping nearby. Second of all, the criminal could have immediately throttled the victim, who..."

"All right, all right" he whispered, "all right. Just a moment. One more thing: who do you think... who do you...?"

"Suspect - is that it? Who do I suspect? How do you think - in your opinion, could a stranger break at night into a locked house, guarded by a watchman and attentive dogs? I'm sure you'll say that the dogs and the watchman fell asleep, while the entrance door was left open through inattention? Am I right? An unfortunate coincidence?"

"Nobody could have entered," he replied with pride. He sat upright, and I could see that, motionless, he despised me, despised me wholeheartedly.

"Nobody," I chimed in eagerly, delighted at the sight of his pride, "absolutely nobody! Which leaves only the three of you and the three servants. But there was no way the servants could pass into the room because you...for some obscure reason... had locked the door to the servants' quarters. Are you going to tell me that you didn't?"

"No, I'm not!"

"But why did you lock that door - what was the reason?"

He sprang out of his chair. "Stop playacting!" I said, and with this short remark put him back in place. Paralyzed, his anger degenerated into squeaky tones.

"I locked it - I don't know - mechanically," he said with difficulty and whispered twice, "strangled, strangled."

He was nervous! All of them had a profound, nervous disposition.

"And since your mother and sister also... mechanically locked the door to their bedroom (and, at any rate, it would be difficult to suppose...am I right?), there is only... you know who's left. Only you were in a position to enter your father's room that night. The moon has already set, the dogs have fallen asleep, but someone is still calling out there, beyond the dense forest." [\[23\]](#)

He burst out:

"So this is supposed to mean that... I... that I... ha, ha, ha!"

"And this laugh is supposed to mean that it wasn't you," I remarked and, after a few exertions, his laugh degenerated into a long-drawn false note.

"It wasn't you? But, in that case, young man," I went on quietly, "please tell me - why didn't you shed a single tear?"

"Shed a tear?"

"Yes. That's what your mother whispered to me, right in the beginning, as recently as yesterday, on the stairs. It's usual for mothers to embarrass their children and give away their secrets. And, a while ago, you laughed. You declared that you were glad of your father's death!" I said, using his words against him with such triumphant obtuseness that, losing his strength, he looked at me as though I was a mere instrument of torture.

But sensing that the matter was becoming serious, he tried, straining all of his willpower, to stoop to an explanation in the form of *avis au lecteur* - a comment on the side - which he stammered out with difficulty.

"That was... irony... you understand... a reversal... on purpose."

"You presumed to speak ironically about your father's death?"

He didn't say anything, so I whispered confidentially, almost into his ear:

"Why are you ashamed like that? After all, there's nothing shameful about your father's death."

Remembering that moment, I'm glad I didn't get hurt, even though he didn't make the slightest move.

"Or maybe you're ashamed because you loved him? Maybe you really loved him?"

He stammered out with difficulty - with loathing - with desperation:

"Very well. Since you insist... since ... all right, as you wish... I did love him."

And tossing something onto the table, he exclaimed:

"Here! That's his hair!"

Indeed, it was a wisp of hair.

"Good." I said. "Take it away."

"I don't want to! You can take it! I'm giving it to you!"

"Why this outburst? All right - you loved him - fine. I have only one more question (since, as you can see, I can't, for the life of me, make sense of those love affairs of yours). I admit that you've almost convinced me with that wisp of hair - but, you see, there is mainly one thing I don't understand."

Here I sank my voice low once more and whispered into his ear:

"Granted, you loved him - but why is there so much shame in your love, so much contempt?"

He turned pale and didn't say anything.

"Why so much cruelty and repulsion? Why are you disguising your love, just like a criminal disguising his crime? You refuse to answer? You don't know? Then maybe I'll tell you why.

It's true that you loved your father, but when he became ill... you suggested to your mother that he might need some fresh air. Your mother, who also loved him, listened to you and nodded. That's right, that's right, fresh air won't do any harm - and so she moved into the adjoining room of her daughter, where she would be at the beck and call of her sick husband. Wasn't it so? Correct me if I'm wrong."

"Yes, that's how it was!"

"That's it! I'm an old fox, as you can see. One week goes by. On a certain evening, mother and sister lock the door to the bedroom. Why? God only knows! Do we need to contemplate every turn of a key in the lock? They turn once, twice, mechanically, and - hop - into their beds! Yes; and at the same time, you lock the door to the servants' quarters downstairs. Why? Is there an explanation for every such detail? Someone might as well demand that you explain why you're sitting instead of standing."

He sprang to his feet, then sat down again and said:

"Yes, that's how it was! It was exactly the way you described it!"

"And then it occurred to you that your father might still need something. And maybe - you thought - your mother and sister had fallen asleep, while your father still needed something. And so, quietly - for why should you have disturbed anyone in their sleep? - you went up to father's room by the creaking stairs. Well; and when you finally entered the room - the rest needs no comment - you went all the way, mechanically."

He listened, unable to believe his ears. Suddenly, he snapped himself awake, as it were, and moaned with a note of desperate candor, which can be inspired only by great fear:

"But I wasn't up there at all! I was staying in my room downstairs all the time! I locked

not only the door to the servants' quarters, but also the door to my room - I also locked myself up in my room ... this is a mistake!"

I exclaimed:

"What!? So you also locked yourself up!? - so finally it turns out that all of you locked yourselves up?... In that case, who was it?..."

"Don't know, don't know," he replied astonished, rubbing his forehead. "I think I'm beginning to understand that we were expecting something - perhaps we were waiting for something to happen - perhaps we had a premonition, and from fear, from shame," he suddenly burst out brutally, "we all locked ourselves up in our rooms... because we wanted Father - wanted Father - to put an end to it all by himself!"

"Oh, so sensing that his death was imminent, you locked yourselves up against that approaching death? Then you were waiting for that murder, after all?"

"Waiting?"

"Yes. But in that case, who murdered him? Obviously, he was murdered while all of you were waiting, and no stranger could have entered."

He was silent.

"But I was really locked up in my room," he whispered, stooping under the weight of inexorable logic. "This is a mistake."

"But in that case, who murdered him, who murdered him?" I kept repeating laboriously.

He grew pensive, as though he was making a horrible examination of his conscience; he was pale, motionless, and his eyes were withdrawn into his half-closed eyelids. Did he see anything down there, within his innermost depths? What did he see? Perhaps he saw himself getting out of bed and mounting cautiously the treacherous stairs, his hands ready to commit the act? Perhaps he doubted only for a moment that such a thing would be absolutely unthinkable? Maybe hatred appeared to him, in that single second, to complement love - who knew? (such was only my assumption) - maybe in that single twinkle of an eye he saw the gruesome duality of all feelings - saw that love and hatred were two faces of the same thing. This startling if fleeting revelation (such, at least, was my interpretation) must suddenly have devastated everything within him, and he found himself, together with his self-pity, unbearable. Although it lasted only for a moment, it sufficed. After all, for twelve hours he had been compelled to contend with my suspicion; for twelve hours he had been harassed by my nonsensical, relentless pursuit and he must have mulled the absurdity of it a thousand times - he hung his head like a broken man, then lifted it, peered at me up close with great bitterness, and said distinctly, right in my face:

"I did it. *I* went."

"What do you mean, you went?"

"I went, I say, all the way - like you said - all the way, mechanically!"

"What?! So it's true! So you plead guilty? It was you? You - really you?"

"Yes."

"That's it. And I bet the whole thing didn't take more than one minute."

"No - one minute at the most. I suppose it didn't take even that long. Then I returned to my room, went to bed and fell asleep - but before falling asleep, I yawned and thought, I vividly remember, that I would have to get up early the next morning!"

I was astonished: he confessed everything so smoothly; even not so much smoothly - for he was hoarse - as ferociously, with utter delight. There was no doubt about it!

Nobody could deny it! Yes, but the neck again: what to do with the neck, which stubbornly denied all allegations of violence in the bedroom upstairs? My mind was working at fever pitch - but what can one's mind do when faced with the mindlessness of a corpse?

Crestfallen, I looked at the murderer, who seemed to be waiting. And it's difficult to explain, but at that moment I realized that the only thing left was a frank confession. There was no point in beating my head against the wall, i.e. against the neck, any longer - any further resistance or evasions would have been to no avail. As soon as I realized that, I felt an enormous trust in him. I realized that I had gone too far, had caused a little too much trouble - and, distressed, tired, exhausted after so many exertions, so many facial expressions, I was suddenly transformed into a small child, a helpless little boy, and felt the urge to confide my errors and pranks in my elder brother. It seemed to me that he would understand... and probably wouldn't refuse to give me advice... "Yes," I thought, "the only thing left is a frank confession... he will understand me, he will help me! He will find a solution!" But just in case, I rose and imperceptibly approached the door. "You see," I said, my lips slightly quivering, "there's a certain hitch... a certain obstacle - a mere technicality - not very important, for that matter. The thing is that..." - my hand was already on the doorknob" - ...that, actually, the body bears no trace of strangulation. Technically speaking, he wasn't strangled at all, but died a normal death of a heart attack. The neck, you know, the neck...! The neck is intact!"

Having said that, I dived through the half-open door and ran down the hall at full speed. I burst into the room, where the deceased lay, and hid in the wardrobe - and with a certain confidence, though also with fear, began to wait. Inside it was pitch-dark, uncomfortable, stuffy, and the trousers of the deceased were flapping my cheek. I waited a long time, already began to doubt, thought that nothing would happen and that they had made a complete fool of me, that they had hoodwinked me! All of a sudden, the door silently opened and someone slipped in gingerly - and then an awful noise reached me: the bed was madly creaking, and all formalities were being taken care of *ex post* in perfect silence! [24] Then the footsteps receded just as they had come. After a long hour, when I clambered out of the wardrobe trembling and soaked in sweat, confusion and havoc reigned amid the jumbled sheets: the body was flung athwart the crumpled pillow and the neck of the deceased revealed distinct imprints of all ten fingers. Forensic experts grimaced at those imprints, saying that something about them was not as it should have been. However, those imprints, together with an explicit admission of guilt by the criminal, were accepted as sufficient grounds at the trial.

## NOTES

15. *Nolens volens*: (Latin) willy-nilly; whether willing or unwilling; in spite of oneself.
16. *Crimen laessae maiestatis*: In the old days, this Latin locution referred to an offense against the dignity of a monarch or other ruler (lese majesty). In the context of this story, however, it connotes presumptuous behavior and/or disrespect.
17. *She didn't react with the slightest stir, standing on like a cypress*: It should be remembered that the cypress serves as a symbol of mourning.
18. *Niobe* (Greek myths): Daughter of Tantalus and Dione. She taunted Leto (Latona) for having only two children (Niobe herself had ten sons and ten daughters), and the outraged mother appealed to the gods for revenge. As a result, Niobe's children were killed, and Niobe was turned into stone.
- The Sword of Damocles* (Greek myths): The symbol of an impending disaster. In an attempt to flatter a wealthy and powerful tyrant (Dionysus by name), Damocles called him a happy man, saying that he would gladly trade places with him. Dionysus therefore invited Damocles to a sumptuous banquet to show him what his happiness really was. At a certain point during the banquet, Damocles saw a naked sword suspended over his head by a single horse-hair - and his pleasant illusions about happiness were immediately shattered.
19. *When I finally found myself alone in my room, I removed my collar*: Along with bowlers, top hats, spats, chain watches, etc., removable collars were quite fashionable among men at the time this story was written (circa 1930). They were washed and starched apart from the shirt and discarded when they became worn, while the shirt could remain in use for years to come. Removable collars were stiff and usually made of linen.
20. *And I began...form syllogisms, gather up the threads and seek circumstantial evidence*: The term *syllogism* refers to a form of reasoning in which a conclusion is reached from two statements, as in "All men must die; I am a man; therefore, I must die." (Oxford American Dictionary, Heald Colleges Edition, 1986)
21. *But appearances notwithstanding... how do you make a roast rabbit without a rabbit?*: The Russian writer Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoevski (1821-1881) presented a similar conundrum in his political novel *Besy* (1871-1872), variously translated into English as "The Possessed," "The Devils" or "Demons."
22. *But if you can't remove a hurdle, you have to jump over it* - hic Rhodus, hic salta: (Latin) "Rhodus is here, here is where you jump!" In the fable *The Braggart* by Aesop [probably 620-560 BC], an athlete brags that he once performed an extraordinary jump in Rhodes, a fact which may be corroborated by witnesses. The punch line is provided by a bystander: there is no need of witnesses, for if the athlete really is what he claims to be, he may as well make the jump here and now.
23. *The moon has set...beyond the dense forest*: Quotation from *Laura i Filon* (1780) ["Laura and Filon"] by *Franciszek Karpiński* (1741- 1825), a minor Polish poet.
24. *Suddenly...in perfect silence*: I have preserved the discrepancy between "the bed was madly creaking" and "all formalities were being taken care of *ex post* in perfect silence." The Latin phrase *ex post* means "retroactively, after the fact."

## A FEAST AT COUNTESS VON DOFF'S

by Witold Gombrowicz

Translated from the Polish by Christopher Makosa

It's difficult to state with absolute certainty how I established my cordial relations with Countess von Doff. Naturally, by cordial relations I mean the slight degree of closeness which may exist between a socialite, pureblooded and aristocratic down to her last dainty little bone, and a person that is respectable and dignified - but of only middle-class origins. I flatter myself that I may have won the affections of the discriminating Countess due to a certain nobility, which I occasionally manage to show in favorable circumstances, as well as my penetrating insight and a certain sense of idealism. In fact, ever inclined toward the sublime, I've been a thinking reed [\[25\]](#) at heart since childhood and I often spend endless hours contemplating beautiful and lofty matters.

I suppose that due to my detached curiosity, my nobility of thought, my romantic, aristocratic and idealistic cast of mind, which is somewhat old-fashioned nowadays, I gained access to the Countess' *petit fours* and to her remarkable Friday dinners. Indeed, the Countess was a high-minded woman: devout on one side and artistic on the other, she acted as patron of charity fairs and at the same time paid homage to the Muses. Her numerous acts of compassion compelled admiration; her charitable tea parties and artistic five-o'clock receptions, at which she appeared as some de Médicis [\[26\]](#), were much renowned; and the smallest salon of her palace, in which the Countess received only a select circle of truly dear and trusted guests, was alluring in its exclusivity.

But most famous of all were meatless Friday dinners at the Countess'. As she herself put it, these dinners were a welcome break from her daily charity work; they served as a kind of holiday and retreat. "I want to have something for myself too," said the Countess with a wistful smile, inviting me for the first time to one of those dinners two months ago. "Do come to see me on Friday. There'll be some singing, music, some of my closest friends - and you too... and obviously on Friday, so as to avoid any thought of meat," she winced slightly, "that meat you're constantly eating and that blood. Too much meat! Too much meat fume! You people see no happiness beyond a bloody beefsteak - you run away from fasting - you would constantly devour disgusting meat scraps all day long." "I'm throwing down the gauntlet," she added, slightly squinting, meaningful and symbolic as ever. "I want to prove that a fast is not a diet, but a feast for the soul." What an honor, to be among the ten or, at the most, fifteen people, who have had the rare distinction of being invited to meatless dinners at the Countess'!

I've always been drawn to and mesmerized by the world of fashionable society, not to mention the world of those dinners. It appeared that, deep down inside, Countess von Doff intended to dig new Holy Trinity trenches to resist the onslaught of present-day barbarism (after all, the blood of the Krasinskis flowed in her veins) [\[27\]](#). It seemed that she was deeply convinced that born aristocrats were not only predestined to add outward

luster to parties and receptions, but in every area, also spiritual and artistic, they could secure self-sufficiency for themselves on the strength of their superior breeding - and, therefore, an aristocratic salon sufficed in every respect to create a truly sublime salon. This thought, though archaic and somewhat pitiful, was remarkably daring and profound in its venerable archaic nature; it was the kind of thought one could definitely expect from a descendent of doughty field marshals. And indeed, when at table, in an antique dining room, far away from carcasses, carnage and a billion slaughtered cattle, representatives of the oldest families revived Plato's symposia under the leadership of the Countess, the spirit of poetry and philosophy seemed to float amid the crystal chandeliers and flowers, while enchanted words fell into verse of their own accord.

For example, there was a certain prince who, at the request of the Countess, assumed the role of intellectual and philosopher - and he did so in such a princely manner and expressed such beautiful and noble ideas that a humiliated Plato would probably have stationed himself with a napkin behind the prince's chair to exchange platters. There was a baroness, who undertook to grace these gatherings by singing, even though she had never taken any singing lessons before - and I doubt that Ada Sari [\[28\]](#) would have produced such glorious tone under the circumstances. There was something too wonderful for words, wonderfully vegetarian - luxuriously vegetarian, I might add - in the gastronomic moderation of those receptions; and those immensely rich magnates, bent modestly over a dish of kohlrabi, made an unforgettable impression, especially in view of the frightfully carnivorous habits of the present day. It even seemed that our teeth - the teeth of rodents - lost their mark of Cain there... [\[29\]](#) As for the food, without doubt the vegetarian cuisine of the Countess was unequalled: the flavor of her tomatoes stuffed with rice was remarkably rich, and her omelets with asparagus were phenomenal with regard to firmness and aroma.

Since I was again honored with an invitation after several months, the Friday in question I hailed a modest hackney carriage and, feeling understandably apprehensive, drew up in front of the ancient facade of a palace located just outside of Warsaw. But instead of the fifteen or so guests I had expected to find there, I saw only two people, who seemed none too remarkable at that: a toothless old marchioness, who indulged in vegetables out of necessity every day of the week, and a certain baron of a somewhat dubious family - i.e. Baron de Apfelbaum - who compensated for a dearth of ancestors and a disastrous nose with his millions and his mother née Princess Filidumski. Moreover, right at the outset I sensed an almost indiscernible dissonance... as if something were out of tune... and, what's more, the soup made from pumpkin stuffed with pâté - *spécialité de la maison* [\[30\]](#)- sweet pumpkin soup, stewed until tender and served as the first course, proved unexpectedly meager, watery and without substance. Despite that, I didn't show the least surprise or disappointment (such behavior would have been acceptable everywhere else, but not at Countess von Doff's). Instead, my face radiant and blissful, I ventured a compliment:

*Such exquisite soup -  
And without a corpse or crime  
[an event deserving of a truly brilliant rhyme.]*



As I said before, rhymed poetry during Friday receptions at the Countess' rose to our lips of its own accord as a result of the exceptional harmony and sparkle of those gatherings - it would have been quite inappropriate not to embellish stretches of prose with rhymes. Suddenly - my horror! - Baron de Apfelbaum who, as an exceedingly delicate poet and fastidious gourmet, was doubly enamored of the inspired cuisine of our hostess, stooped close toward me and whispered in my ear with an ill-concealed repulsion and anger, which I would never have expected from him:

*This soup would've been first-class  
Had the cook not proved an...*

Astounded by this prank, I coughed. What did he mean? Luckily, the Baron came to his senses at the last moment. What had happened since my previous visit? The dinner seemed but a lame excuse for the real thing, the food was poor and the guests were down in the mouth. After the soup, the main course was served: a platter of sparse and meager carrot in roux. I admired the spiritual strength of the Countess! Pale, wearing a black evening gown studded with hereditary diamonds, she consumed the insipid dish with a tremendous courage, making the others follow in her footsteps - and with her usual skill she sent the conversation soaring toward the clouds. Waving a napkin, she broached the subject gracefully, though with a touch of melancholy:

*Let profound ideas flow!  
What is Beauty - do you know?*

Putting on airs in moderation and flaunting my tailcoat's front, I replied immediately:

*Love is most beautiful of all, no doubt,  
Something we cannot shine without -  
We, the winged breed which neither sows nor plows -  
Sheep of God in dress coats and resplendent evening gowns.*

The Countess thanked me with a smile for the immaculate beauty of this thought. The Baron, like a thoroughbred overcome by the spirit of noble rivalry, joined the fray; and tapping his fingers, spewing sparks from precious stones and spraying the air with rhymes (the art of which he alone possessed), he remarked:

*A beautiful rose  
Beautifully grows (etc.)  
But compassion is more beautiful.  
Do look out the window!  
Outside it's still raining so!  
For three days now it's been nasty, windy, cold -  
Oh, the misery of the poor and of the old!  
Yes, a tear of compassion, that shower of pity -  
This is the secret of Beauty and nobility!*

"Point well taken, dear sir," said the toothless Marchioness, lisping with delight.  
"Marvelous! Compassion! St. Francis of Assisi! I also have my poor babies - little children suffering from rickets, to whom I dedicated the whole of my toothless old age! We should always remember the poor, the unfortunate..."  
"Prisoners and the disabled, who can't afford to buy artificial limbs," added the Baron.  
"Haggard, skinny, retired old schoolmistresses," said the Countess with compassion.  
"Hairdressers with varicose veins and famished miners suffering from sciatica,"  
I added, overcome with emotion.  
"Yes," said the Countess, and her eye sparkled and plunged into the far-off distance.  
"Yes! Love and Compassion, those two flowers - *roses de thé* - the tea roses of life... But we shouldn't forget our duties toward ourselves either!" Then she reflected for a while and, paraphrasing Prince Józef Poniatowski's famous saying, said: "God has entrusted me with Maria von Doff - and I shall return her only to Him!" [\[31\]](#)

*Transports of emotion, ideals I should proclaim -  
An everlasting flame!*

"Bravo! Incomparable! What a thought! Profound! Wise! Proud!" God has entrusted me with Maria von Doff - and I shall return her only to Him!" all exclaimed, while I (considering that Prince Józef Poniatowski was under discussion) allowed myself to gently strike the note of patriotism:

*The White Eagle - always remember that name!* [\[32\]](#)

The footmen brought in an enormous cauliflower, which was basted with fresh butter and deliciously browned. Alas, it was fair to assume on the basis of previous events that the cauliflower's color was as sickly as a consumptive's complexion. This is how a conversation at the Countess' flowed and what a great feast it was even in such adverse culinary circumstances. I flatter myself that my statement about Love being most beautiful of all was not too superficial. I even suppose that it could be the gem of many a philosophical poem. However, right away another guest, bidding *in plus*, contributes an

aphorism about Compassion being even more beautiful than Love. Splendid! And true! Come to think of it, Compassion has wider scope and covers more ground than lofty Love. But that's not all: afraid that we might melt away into Love and Compassion without a trace, the Countess, our wise Amphitryon [\[33\]](#), mentions lofty duties toward ourselves; and then I, discreetly taking advantage of the final rhyme ending in "-ame," add only one thing: "The White Eagle - always remember that name!" What's more, the form, the manners, the mode of expression and the noble and refined moderation of the feast vie with the content! "No!" I thought delighted. "Those who never attended a Friday reception at the Countess' simply don't know aristocrats!"

"Excellent cauliflower," the Baron-cum-gourmet-cum-poet suddenly murmured with an agreeable disappointment in his voice.

"Indeed," the Countess concurred, watching the plate suspiciously. As for me, I didn't detect any outstanding quality in the cauliflower's flavor; I found it as bland as the previous dishes.

"Could it be Philip?" asked the Countess, lightening flashing in her eyes.

"This matter should be investigated!" said the Marchioness distrustfully.

"Find Philip!" ordered the Countess.

"There is no reason why we should hide anything from you, my dear friend," said Baron de Apfelbaum, and explained to me in a low voice tinged with a concealed irritation what it was all about. And so, on Friday before last, the Countess had accidentally caught Philip the cook seasoning the main dish of the feast with bullion and meat flavors! What a scoundrel! I couldn't believe it! Really, only a cook could do a thing like that! Worse still, the defiant wretch apparently remained unrepentant and even had the temerity to defend himself by asserting that "he wanted the dinner guests to have their cake and eat it too." What did he mean? (Rumor had it that he used to be in a bishop's employ) He vowed to refrain from such disgraceful acts only after the Countess threatened to have him immediately dismissed! "What a dunce!" the Baron summed up his story with anger. "What a dunce! He let himself get caught! That's why most guests, as you see, stayed away today, and... hmm... really, were it not for this cauliflower, I'm afraid I would say they did the right thing."

"No," said the toothless Marchioness, chewing the vegetable, "no, this isn't the flavor of meat... munch-munch....this isn't the flavor of meat, but...*comment dirais-je* [\[34\]](#)- it's extremely stimulating - it must have plenty of vitamins."

"Somewhat peppery," remarked the Baron, taking a second helping discreetly. "Slightly peppery - munch-munch - but without meat," he added hurriedly. "Distinctly vegetarian, peppery and cauliflower-like. You can rely on my palate, dear Countess: in matters of taste, I'm another Pythia!" [\[35\]](#)

But the Countess didn't calm down until the cook appeared - a tall thin individual with reddish hair and a sidelong glance - and swore on the shade of his departed wife that the cauliflower was pure and unblemished.

"That's cooks for you!" I said with an air of sympathy and also took a second helping of that remarkably popular dish (though I still couldn't detect any outstanding quality in it).

"Oh, you should keep an eye on cooks!" (I wasn't sure if my remarks were sufficiently tactful, but I was bubbling with an excitement that was light as champagne froth) "A cook with that cap of his and that white apron!"

"Philip seems so well-meaning," said the Countess with an undertone of sorrow and mute

reproach, reaching for the butter dish.

"Well-meaning, well-meaning - certainly..." I said, clinging to my opinion with what was probably a superfluous stubbornness. "But then, a cook ... mind you, is a commoner, *homo vulgaris*, whose task it is to make exquisite, delicate dishes - there is a certain dangerous paradox in this. The boor prepares choice delicacies - what on earth is that supposed to mean?"

"Remarkable aroma!" declared the Countess. She inhaled the cauliflower's flavor (which I couldn't smell) with dilated nostrils without putting down the fork, which was flashing briskly.

"Remarkable!" echoed the banker and tied a napkin around his shirtfront, so as not to become sullied by the butter. "Just a little bit more, if I may ask, dear Countess. Really, I'm coming to life again after this... hmm... thin soup ...munch-munch. True, cooks can't be trusted. I once hired a cook who could prepare Italian pasta like no one else: I virtually couldn't get enough of it! And - just imagine - one day I step into the kitchen and see my pasta swarming in a pot - literally swarming! - and it was earthworms, munch-munch - earthworms from my own garden, which the blackguard served as pasta! I've never looked - munch-munch - into pots ever since!"

"That's right," I said. "Exactly!" I went on to talk about cooks being butchers and small-time murderers. I argued that they didn't care about anything at all; that all they could do was pepper, season and prepare - and even though my remarks were quite inappropriate and even downright offensive, I couldn't stop talking. "Although you'd never even touch the cook, dear Countess, you eat his hair... in soup!" I would have continued in this vein, for unexpectedly I was seized by a fit of some treacherous eloquence, but suddenly I broke off because nobody was listening to me! I was frightened and astonished by the unusual sight of the Countess, i.e. our *patronessa* and *dogaressa* [36], who was devouring the food in silence and so greedily that her ears shook. The Baron, bent over his plate, was bravely trying to emulate her, slurping and smacking his lips with gusto - and the old Marchioness was doing her best to stay the pace, chewing and swallowing huge chunks, for she was obviously afraid that somebody might grab the choicest morsels from under her nose!

This incredible and unexpected sight of gobbling - I can't put it any differently - of *such* gobbling and in *such* a household; this awful leap; this diminished-seventh chord [37] shook me to the foundations to such an extent that, unable to restrain myself, I sneezed; and as I had left my handkerchief in a coat pocket, I felt obliged to leave the company and rose from the table. Slumping motionless in a chair in the anteroom, I tried to steady my wobbly senses. Only those who, like me, knew the Countess, the Marchioness and the Baron for so long, admiring their refined gestures, the incomparable nobility of their features, their delicacy, moderation and the subtlety of all their habits (especially their eating habits) could truly judge the overwhelming impression I had received. It was at precisely this moment that I accidentally glanced at the "The Red Courier" sticking out of my coat pocket and noticed this sensational headline:

## KOLIFLAUER'S MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

and the subheading

## KOLIFLAUER IN DANGER OF FREEZING TO DEATH

followed by a brief note that read:

*"Walenty Koliflauer, a groom in the village of Rudka (which belongs to the estates of the right honorable Countess von Doff), arrived at the police precinct to report that his son Bolek, age 8, stubby nose, flaxen hair, had run away from home. As the police discovered, the boy escaped because his father, when drunk, whipped him with a strap, while his mother starved him (which is, unfortunately, a widespread phenomenon during the prevailing crisis). There is a concern that the boy may freeze to death wandering through the fields in the foul autumn weather."*

"Sss...", I hissed, looking out the window at the fields, which were enveloped in thin sheets of rain. Then I returned to the dining room, where the enormous silver platter revealed the last remnants of the cauliflower. The Countess' stomach looked as if she were seven months' pregnant, the Baron had almost drowned his face in the plate, and the old Marchioness chewed tirelessly, moving her jaws - really, I have to say it - like a cow! "Divine, wonderful," they kept repeating. "Brilliant, incomparable!" Utterly bemused, I sampled the cauliflower once more - deliberately and attentively - but I couldn't detect anything that would justify, at least partially, the unabashed delight of the company. "What can you possibly see in this?" I said, clearing my throat shyly, somewhat ashamed. "Ha, ha, ha - he wants to know what we see in this!" the Baron loudly exclaimed, stuffing his mouth in a jubilant mood.

"You really can't appreciate that flavor... young man?" asked the Marchioness, who didn't stop digesting the food for a single moment.

"You're not a gourmet," the Baron observed pointedly, as though with a hint of polite regret. "And I... *et moi, je ne suis pas gastronome - je suis gastrosophe!*" [38] Did I hear wrong or did something swell within him as he was uttering that French phrase? Indeed, he hurled the last word "gastrosophe" out of his puffed cheeks with an unusual haughtiness, which I hadn't seen in him before!

"It's well prepared, certainly...very tasty, yes, very...but...", I spluttered.

"But...? But what? So you really can't appreciate that flavor, delicate freshness, munch-munch, indefinable firmness... special pepper... that subtle aroma or that alcohol? Why, dear sir (he had called me "dear sir" in such a condescending tone for the first time since I met him). "You can't be serious? Do you want to make us feel bad?" [39]

"Don't tell him anything!" interrupted the Countess playfully, doubling up with laughter.

"Don't tell him anything! He won't understand anyway!"

"Good taste, young man, is something you suck in with your mother's milk," lisped the Marchioness with an air of benevolence, apparently insinuating that my mother (may she rest in peace!) bore a funny folksy maiden name.

Then, abandoning the food, they rolled, their full stomachs first, into a gilt boudoir à la Louis XVI where, sprawling in the softest armchairs, they openly began to laugh at me, as if I had given them any reason for such transports of joy. I had been socializing with aristocrats at five-o'clock teas and charity concerts for a long time, but - I swear - I had never seen such behavior, such an abrupt transition or such a completely unwarranted transformation. Not knowing if I should sit or stand or remain serious or rather *faire*

*bonne mine a mauvais jeu* [40] and grin stupidly - I tried vaguely and I tried shyly to return to Arcadia [41], i.e. to Beauty, i.e. to the pumpkin soup:

*To return to Beauty...*

"Enough, enough!" exclaimed Baron de Apfelbaum, stopping his ears. "Oh, what a bore! And now - fun and games! - *S'encanailler!* [42] I'll sing something better for you! From an operetta!

*Oh, what a funny novice!  
He doesn't grasp any of this!  
I shall begin to make him aware:  
Beauty is not in things beautiful,  
But in delicious fare.  
Good taste! Good taste! Hark - this is Beauty's mark!*

"Bravo!" exclaimed the Countess, and the Marchioness chimed in with her, revealing gums in a senile chortle. "Bravo! *Cocasse! Charmant!*" [43]

"But it seems to me...it's not like that...", I stammered, my dumb stare completely out of keeping with my evening attire.

"We, aristocrats," said the Marchioness, leaning toward me with an air of benevolence, "behave with great casualness in our inner circle where, as you may have heard, we sometimes use crass expressions and tend to act frivolous or at times even singularly boorish. But there's no need to be terrified like that! You should get used to our ways!"

"We aren't that terrible!" put in the Baron in a patronizing manner. "However, it's more difficult to get used to our boorishness than to our refinement!"

"No, we aren't terrible!" piped in the Countess. "We don't eat people alive!"

"We don't eat people, except for..."

"Except for...!"

"*Fi donc, ha, ha, ha,*" [44] they burst into laughter, tossing up embroidered pillows; while the Countess sang:

*Yes, yes -  
Good taste is everything!  
Good taste is everything!  
To make a crayfish tasty, you should torment it a little bit,  
To make a turkey scrumptious, you should torture it on a spit.  
Does anyone know the flavor of my lips?  
Those who have a different taste than we do,  
Will never address us by the familiar "you"!*

"But dear Countess....," I whispered, "the green peas, the carrot, the celery roots, the kohlrabi..."

"The cauliflower!" added the Baron, choking suspiciously.

"Exactly!" I said, completely confused. "Exactly...! The cauliflower! The cauliflower... the fasting... the vegetarian vegetables..."

"Well, what about that cauliflower - did it taste good? It was delicious, wasn't it? I expect you finally grasped the flavor of that cauliflower?" What a tone! What condescension! What a barely noticeable, though menacing and lordly impatience there was in his tone! I began to stutter - didn't know what to answer - how to contradict - or how to confirm - and then (oh, I would never have believed that this noble, humane person, this brother poet, would make me painfully aware that there was no way a commoner like myself could remain in his good graces forever!), reclining in the armchair and stroking his thin long leg, which he inherited from Princess Filidumski, he said to the ladies in a tone which literally crushed me: "Really, dear Countess, there's no point in having to dinner characters whose taste still remains at the level of utter primitivism!"

Then, paying no attention to me, they began, shot glass in hand, to quip among themselves in such a way that I suddenly became *quantité négligeable* [45]: about "Alice" and her chimerical fancies, about "Gabie" and "Buba," about "Princess Mary," about some "pheasants," about somebody being "incorrigible" and somebody else "impossible." They told anecdotes and gossips in shorthand, in lofty language, saying "crazed," "fantastic," "remarkable," "grotesque" and even using a great deal of plebeian swear words, such as "crap" and "frig it," so that this kind of conversation seemed to be the peak of human possibilities. Meanwhile, together with Beauty, humanity and with all the subjects of a thinking reed, wrecked and pushed aside, God knows why, like a useless piece of equipment, I had nothing to say. They also told in a few words some puzzling aristocratic jokes, which aroused extraordinary mirth and which, being ignorant of their origin, I could appreciate only by a forced smile. Good Lord, what could have happened! What was this sudden and cruel transformation? Why were they different while having the pumpkin soup? Was I really disseminating the splendors of humanity with them in the highest harmony a while ago, while having the pumpkin soup? Why this fatal element, and for no apparent reason, too? Why this strangeness, iciness and irony in their humor? Why this incomprehensible inclination toward painful ridicule about my appearance? Why this detachment and aloofness, so I didn't even dare approach them?! I couldn't understand that metamorphosis, and the Marchioness' words about "their circle" reminded me of all those horror stories spread in my middle-class community - to which I lent no credence - about two-faced aristocrats, who lived in isolation and were quite unapproachable toward strangers.

Unable to bear my own silence, which was continually pushing me toward the brink of an abysmal precipice, I finally said to the Countess without rhyme or reason, sounding like an outdated echo of the past: "I'm sorry to bother you... You promised, dear Countess, to give me an inscribed copy of your triolets [46] 'The Prattle of My Soul'."

"What's that?" she asked amused, not hearing me. "How's that? You were saying?"

"Pardon me - you promised, dear Countess, to give me an inscribed copy of your poem 'The Prattle of My Soul'."

"Oh, that's right," replied the Countess distractedly, though with her usual courtesy (usual



or different? or new to such an extent that my cheek flushed with blood without my conscious cooperation?); and picking up from the table a small volume bound in white, she casually scribbled a few courteous words on the title page and signed:

*Boff* the Countess.

"But Countess!" I exclaimed, deeply hurt at seeing the historical name Doff in such an ambiguous context.

"I'm so distracted!" exclaimed the Countess amid general amusement. "I'm so distracted!" However, I didn't feel like laughing. "Sss... sss..." I almost hissed once more. The Countess was laughing loudly and proudly, but at the same time her noble little foot was performing various flourishes on the carpet in an extremely titillating and enticing manner, as though glorying in its own slender ankle - to the right, to the left, or in a circle; the Baron, reclining in his armchair, seemed to be getting ready for an excellent *bon mot*, while his small ear, typical of the Filidumski family, was even smaller than usual - and he was slipping a grape between his lips. The Marchioness was sitting with her usual refinement, but her long thin neck of a *grande dame* was even longer, and its slightly wrinkled surface was peering my way. Besides, one should add a significant detail: the rain, carried by the wind, kept lashing against the windows like a whip.

Maybe I took my staggering, though undeserved tumble too much to heart; maybe under its influence I yielded to the persecution mania of a low-class individual admitted to high society; and it's possible that my sensitivity was stimulated by certain accidental associations or, say, analogies, who knows... it's possible, I'm not going to deny that. But suddenly something quite extraordinary blew from them toward me! And I can't deny that their refinement, subtlety, politeness and elegance were still refined, subtle, polite and elegant in the extreme, no doubt about it. However, I couldn't understand why they were so *stifling* that I was inclined to believe that all those fine and humanitarian qualities had become mad! What's more, I suddenly realized (that was undoubtedly the effect of the dainty foot, ear and neck) that, although they were not looking at me and ignoring me in a lordly manner, they saw my confusion and delighted in it! I also began to suspect that Boff... that Boff wasn't necessarily a mere *lapsus linguae* and that *Boff* simply stood for "boff!" Boff? Boff the Countess? Yes, yes... the shiny toes of patent leather shoes confirmed me in my terrifying conviction! It seemed that they were quietly splitting their sides with laughter because of my failure to appreciate the cauliflower's flavor; because the cauliflower was a mere vegetable to me; because having failed to properly delight in that cauliflower, I gave proof of my artless simplicity and deplorable middle-class mentality. They were quietly splitting their sides with laughter and were getting ready to burst out openly if I only gave vent to my fervent emotions. Yes, yes: they ignored and snubbed me, and at the same time, on the side, with individual aristocratic body parts, with their dainty feet, ears and necks, they provoked and tempted me to break the seal of secrecy.

I don't think I have to add that this quiet temptation and hidden, unwholesome flirtation shook the entire thinking reed in me. I vaguely mentioned the "secret" of aristocracy, that secret of good taste, that mystery which the uninitiated will never uncover even if, as Schopenhauer says, they knew 300 rules of *savoir-vivre* by heart [\[47\]](#). And although I hoped for a moment that, after finding out this secret, I would be admitted



to their inner circle, burr my r's and say "fantastic" and "crazed" like them my burning desire for knowledge was completely paralyzed - leaving other reasons aside - by the fear and concern (why not admit it openly?) that they might slap me in the face. Since one never knows where one stands with aristocrats, one must deal with them more carefully than with a tame leopard. When asked by Princess X about his mother's maiden name, a certain representative of the middle class grew insolent in consequence of the ostensible permissiveness prevailing in that salon and the tolerance shown to two of his previous witticisms; and assuming that he was free to do all he wanted, he replied: "Brewski, by your leave!" - and was immediately expelled for that "by your leave" of his (which was deemed vulgar).

"But Philip," I thought cautiously, "Philip made a vow...!" After all, the cook is a cook! The cook is a cook, the cauliflower a cauliflower, and the Countess a Countess, don't anyone forget that! Yes, the Countess is a countess, the Baron a baron, and the gusts of wind and the nasty weather outside the windows are gusts of wind and nasty weather, while the small hands of a child in the dark and the back bruised by father's strap under the lashing wave of drizzle are small hands and a bruised back, no more... and the Countess is undoubtedly a Countess. The Countess is a countess and she will cut you down to size if you're not careful!

Seeing that I was mired in complete, almost paralytic inactivity, they began, as if imperceptibly, to close in on me, harass me more openly and show a growing willingness to make a fool of me. "Look at that terrified expression!" cried the Countess suddenly. Then they began to tease me, saying that I certainly must be terribly "outraged" and "horrrified," for certainly nobody "rromped and raved" like that in my set; that the manners prevailing in it were incomparably better and not as savage as in their circles, among aristocrats. Feigning fear of my severity, they began playfully to rebuke and reprove one another, pretending that they valued my opinion above everything else.

"Stop talking nonsense! You're awful!" exclaimed the Countess (although the Baron wasn't awful at all; there was nothing awful about him, except for that small ear of his, which he was gleefully touching with the tips of his thin bony fingers).

"Behave decently, I say!" shouted the Baron (the Countess and the Marchioness were behaving quite decently).

"Don't talk nonsense - don't sprawl on the sofa - don't kick up your feet and don't shove your legs onto the table! (God forbid! The Countess had no such intention.) "You're hurting this poor man's feelings! Your dainty nose, dear Countess, is really too aristocratic! Be merciful, Madam! (May I ask who the Countess was to show mercy to because of her dainty nose?) The Countess was quietly shedding tears of joy. However, the fact that I had my head hidden in the sand like an ostrich excited them even further. It seemed that they had thrown all caution to the winds, as though they absolutely wanted to teach me a lesson; and, unable to restrain themselves, they were making increasingly clear allusions. Allusions? What allusions? Oh, the same as always, of course; and they were closing in on me even more openly, more explicitly, more impudently... "May I smoke?" asked the Baron with affectation, taking out his gold cigarette case. (Could he smoke?! It sounded as if he didn't realize that the humidity, the rain and the freezing nasty wind outside could freeze us stiff any minute. Could he smoke?!)

"Do you hear the rain lashing?" lisped the Marchioness naively. (Lashing? Sure it was lashing! It must have done an excellent lashing job out there.) "Oh, listen to that plop-

plop of single drops - listen to that plop-plop-plop-plop - listen, oh! listen to those drops, I'm begging you!"

"Oh, what atrocious, dismal rainy weather, what terrible wind!" exclaimed the Countess.

"Oh, oh, oh - ha, ha, ha - such ferocious storm! It's so unpleasant to watch!

I'm getting goose bumps and I feel like laughing at the mere sight of it!"

"Ha, ha, ha," put in the Baron, "look - how wonderfully everything is dripping! Look at the variety of arabesques traced by the water! Look - how that delightful mud is wonderfully seeping, how everything is spattered with thick ooze, how that mud is oozing just like Cumberland sauce, and how that drizzle is whipping, whipping - wonderfully whipping, and that slight wind biting, biting - how it's making people's faces red, how it's nipping, how wonderfully crushing! Upon my word, this makes my mouth water!"

"Rreally, verry tasty - verry, verry savory!"

"Extremely tasteful!"

"Just like *cotelette de volaille*!

"Or like *frrricassee a la Heine*!"

"Or like *crrrrrayfish frrrrricassee*!"

These *bon mots*, which only born aristocrats can produce with such consummate ease, were followed by movements and gestures, which... the meaning of which, wedged into my chair and utterly motionless, I wish, oh! I wish I hadn't understood. I won't even mention that the ear, the dainty nose, the refined neck and the small foot were on the verge of reaching the level of ardor and frenzy - and what's more, the banker, drawing deeply on a cigarette, began to blow small blue rings into the air. My God, if he only blew a ring or two! But he blew one ring after another, pursing his lips into a little snout - while the Countess and the Marchioness applauded! And every ring rose into the air and dissolved slowly in melodious curlicues! The Countess' long, serpentine white arm rested on the patterned satin of the armchair all the time, while her nervous-looking ankle fidgeted under the table like a poisonous vicious black viper. I felt vaguely uncomfortable. That's not all - I swear I'm not exaggerating! - the Baron went in his effrontery so far that he curled his upper lip, took a toothpick out of his pocket and began to pick his teeth (yes, his teeth), which were precious, decayed and heavily laced with gold!

Aghast, utterly at a loss as to what to do and where to escape, I addressed myself imploringly to the Marchioness, who had shown me the most kindness and who, at the dinner table, had so movingly worshipped Compassion and her little children suffering from rickets - and I began to talk about compassion - I almost begged her for compassion. "Oh, Madam," I said, "you've shown so much devotion to poor children! Oh, Madam! For God's sake!" Do you know what she answered me? Surprised, she looked at me with her lackluster pupils, wiped tears of delirious joy from her eyes, and then, as if remembering something, she said:

"Oh, you're talking about my little English colts...? Oh yes, as a matter of fact, when I see them totter clumsily on their poor twisted legs, stumble and fall, I still feel hale and hearty! Old, but hale and hearty! In the old days, I rode on English thoroughbreds, in a black riding habit and shiny jodhpur boots, and now... *hélas, les beaux temps sont passés* [48] - now that I can't do that because I'm old, I ride merrily on my small misshapen English colts!" Suddenly she reached down with her hand, making me recoil, for - I

swear - she wanted to show me her straight old leg, which was still hale and hearty! "Oh, Christ!" I exclaimed, barely alive. "But Love, Compassion, Beauty, prisoners, disabled, retired, emaciated schoolmistresses..."

"Oh, we remember them, we certainly do!" said the Countess with a laugh that sent shivers down my spine. "Oh, these dear, poor mistresses."

"We remember them!" reassured me the old Marchioness.

"We remember them!" echoed the Baron de Apfelbaum - while I was paralyzed with fear.

"We remember them! Oh, these dear, well-meaning prisoners!"

They weren't looking at me: they were looking up at the ceiling, tilting back their heads as if that alone could stop the violent spasms of their jowls. Ha! I had no more doubts. I finally understood where I was and was seized by an uncontrollable twitching of my lower jaw. Meanwhile, the rain kept lashing the windows like a whip.

"But Providence... there is Providence!" I finally stammered out with the last of my strength, casting frantically around for some point of support. "There is Providence," I added quietly, for the word "Providence" sounded so inappropriate that everyone fell silent. However, their faces revealed various ominous signs, which prefigured the disastrous effects of the blunder I had made - and all I could do was to wait for them to ask me to leave!

"Oh yes," retorted Baron de Apfelbaum after a moment, crushing me with the utmost tact. "Providence? It's in America, in the state of Rhode Island!"

Who would have ventured some repartee? Who wouldn't have been at a loss for words, as they say? I lapsed into silence. Meanwhile, the Marchioness sat down at the piano, while the Baron and the Countess began to frolic - and there was so much style, good taste and elegance emanating from each of their movements that - ha! - I wanted to escape, but how could I leave the company without so much as a goodbye? And how could I say goodbye when they were dancing? So I was watching from a corner and I have to say that I had never expected to see such utterly shameless and brazen-faced wretches! I can't violate my nature by describing what was happening - no, nobody can demand that from me. Suffice it to say that, while the Countess was putting forward her dainty foot, the Baron was withdrawing his many, many times - and this with a perfectly affable face and with such an expression as though that dance was, say, a mere tango - while the Marchioness was playing passages, arpeggios and trills on the piano! But I already knew what it was: they had forcibly crammed the dance of cannibals into my soul! The dance of cannibals! - with style, good taste and elegance - and I began to look around for an idol, a Negroid monster with a square skull, upturned lips, rounded cheeks and a flattened nose, which was presiding over the Bacchanalia [\[49\]](#) from above. I looked around and noticed something of the sort outside the window: a round child's face with a flattened nose, upraised brows, protruding ears, emaciated and feverish, but staring with the cosmic idiotic expression of a Negro idol and with such infinite delight that, like hypnotized, I couldn't take my eyes from the buttons of my vest for an hour (or two).

At dawn, when I finally escaped down the slippery stairs of the porch in the graying wet weather, I saw a body lying in the bed of dried irises under the window. Quite simply, it was the dead body of a barefoot little boy of eight with flaxen hair and a stubby nose, who was so emaciated that he seemed to have been utterly devoured - indeed, only a few tiny bits of flesh remained under the grimy skin. Ha! So poor Bolek Koliflauer had come all the way to the palace, attracted by the bright windows he could see from afar in

the sodden field. And when I was rushing out of the gate, Philip the cook suddenly emerged out of nowhere in a white apron, with a round cap, reddish stubble and a sidelong glance. Then, lean and refined, looking like a master of the culinary arts who butchers hens and then serves them as chicken fricassee, fawning on me, bowing and groveling abjectly, he said: "I hope you enjoyed your meatless dinner, sir!"

## NOTES

25. *thinking reed*: "Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed." (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by D. A. Kreilshheimer, Penguin Books, 1966, p. 95).

26. ...*at which she appeared as a de Médicis*: The reference is to Catherine de Médicis (1519-1589) and/or Marie de Médicis (1573-1642), descendants of the illustrious Medici family, which ruled Florence for almost three centuries. Catherine, queen of France, ruled as regent during her son's minority. A patron of the arts, she built a new wing of the Louvre Museum, the château of Monceau and initiated construction of the Tuileries gardens. Marie, queen consort of Henry IV of France, also ruled as regent during her son's minority, and was a patron of the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, who illustrated her life in a brilliant series of 21 paintings (1622-1624).

27. In order to understand this obscure allusion, the reader should be aware that:

a. The eponymous heroine of this story (Maria Kotłubaj in the original) was modeled on one Marta Krasiński, a socialite dedicated to charity work and culture (see Witold Gombrowicz, *Wspomnienia Polskie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1996, p. 94);

b. The idea of *Holy Trinity trenches* originated from Zygmunt Krasiński's play "The Undivine Comedy." In it, the reactionaries (mainly aristocrats, landowners and the clergy), positioned in the trenches surrounding the Holy Trinity Castle, defend themselves against the revolutionaries (the lower classes), attempting to stem the tide of what may be termed "barbarism," "savagery," etc. See *Note 9* on *Zygmunt Krasiński (1812-1859)*, the 19th century playwright and poet.

28. *Ada Sari (1886-1968)*: Polish-born opera singer. Ada Sari (whose real name was Jadwiga Szajer) was a renowned coloratura soprano - a vocal virtuoso capable of performing various spectacular effects, such as rapid runs and trills, in the highest register.

29. *It even seemed that our teeth...lost their mark of Cain there*: The divine mark that was affixed to Cain for slaying his brother Abel (Genesis 4:1-16) has become known as the mark (or brand) of Cain and is sometimes used figuratively to denote a murderer.

30. *spécialité de la maison*: (French) - the specialty of the house.

31. *God has entrusted me with Maria von Doff - and I shall return her only to Him*. Legend has it that the last words Prince Józef Poniatowski uttered immediately before drowning in the Elster (at Leipzig, Germany) were: "God has entrusted me with the honor of Poles and I shall return it only to Him!" See *Note 8* on *Prince Józef Poniatowski (1796-1813)*.

32. *The White Eagle*: A crowned white eagle, its wings spread on a red escutcheon, is the

national emblem of Poland.

33. *Amphitryon*: (Greek myths) Foster-father of Hercules. Figuratively, an *amphitryon* is a host at dinner. The term originated from Molière's comedy (*Amphitryon*), in which Amphitryon entertains his guests to a sumptuous feast.

34. *comment dirais-je*: (French) How shall I put it?

35. *Pythia*: (Greek myths) The priestess of Apollo at Delphi. Pythia delivered the answers of Apollo, which were famous for their vagueness and obscurity, to those who came to consult the famous oracle at Delphi.

36. *patronessa and dogaressa* (French, Italian): Literally, patron of the arts and the wife of a Doge (i.e. the chief magistrate in the former republics of Venice (697-1797) and Genoa (1339-1797 and 1802-1805)). As used in this story, the euphonious *dogaressa* connotes a glamorous and influential society woman.

37. *diminished-seventh chord*: This is a musical effect, also known as *accorde di stupefazione* or "chord of stupefaction." Composers sometimes use it to enhance tension and high drama.

38. *Et moi, je ne suis pas gastronome - je suis gastrosophe!* (French): As for me, I'm not a gourmet - I'm a philosopher of food!

39. *Why, dear sir...*: From now on Baron de Apfelbaum burrs his r's, affecting the Parisian *grasseymant* (the French verb *grasseyer* means "to use a uvular 'r'"). This phonetic oddity was attributed to Polish aristocrats in humorous or satirical writings. In this context, it is pertinent to note that native Polish speakers roll their r's in standard unaffected speech.

40. *faire bonne mine a mauvais jeu*: (French idiom) to put a brave face on it.

41. *Arcadia*: (Greek myths) A mountainous, sparsely populated country in the middle of the Peloponnesus, famous for its scenic splendors and celebrated by poets of antiquity. Arcadia (also referred to as Arcady) was adopted by the poets as a symbol of quiet rustic life, celestial happiness, Paradise on earth, etc.

42. *S'encanailler!*: (French) to keep bad company, descend to the level of riff-raff.

43. *Cocasse! Charmant!* (French) Funny! Charming!

44. *Fi donc*: (French) an expression used typically to express disdain, contempt or disgust.

45. *quantité négligeable*: (French) an unimportant person or thing.

46. *triolet*: A triolet is a poem or stanza of eight lines rhyming *abaaabab*, the first line repeated as the fourth and seventh and the second as the eighth.

47. ... *even if, as Schopenhauer says, they knew 300 rules of savoir-vivre by heart*: I haven't been able to trace this reference. It appears to be a playful misattribution to the German philosopher Artur Schopenhauer (1788-1890), who was critical of the aristocracy and its ways.

48. *hélas, les beaux temps sont passés*: (French) Alas, the good times are over.

49. *Bacchanalia*: (Greek myths) Festivals in honor of the God of wine and revelry Bacchus (Greek name) a.k.a. Dionysus (Roman name, sometimes incorrectly spelled Dionysius). These celebrations, referred to as the *orgia* or Dionysiac mysteries, subsequently became a byword for intoxication and licentiousness.

## VIRGINITY

by Witold Gombrowicz

Translated from the Polish by Christopher Makosa

Nothing is more unnatural than descriptions of young girls and the fanciful similes used for that purpose. Lips like cherries, bosoms like rosebuds - oh, would that it sufficed to buy some fruit and flowers in a store! And if lips really did have the flavor of ripe cherries, who would have the courage to love? Who would be tempted by a caramel - literally, a sweet kiss? But hush, enough, mystery, taboo, let's not talk too much about lips. When viewed through the prism of affection, Alicia's elbow was now a smooth, virgin white peak merging into the warmer flesh tones of her shoulder and then, with her arm hanging down passively, a sweet, circular hollow, a quiet corner, the side chapel of her body. Apart from that, Alicia resembled any other daughter of a retired Major, brought up by a loving mother in a suburban cottage. Like others, she sometimes caressed her elbow pensively; like others, she learned early on to fidget with her tiny foot in the sand...

But no matter...

The life of an adolescent girl can't be compared to the life of an engineer or a lawyer, or of a housewife, wife or mother. Let's just take the longing and murmuring of a young girl's blood, unceasing as the ticking of a watch. It has already been said somewhere that nothing is stranger than to be alluring. Although it's not easy to guard a being whose reason for existence is to entice, Alicia was well guarded by Fifi, the canary, by her mother - the wife of a Major - and by Bibi, a little pinscher she led on a leash during afternoon walks. The conspiracy of these household pets to protect Alicia was interesting. "Bibi," sang the canary, "Bibi, doggie, guard well our young missy. Beg on hind legs! Beg on hind legs and chase away evil thoughts! Be careful of the umbrella, it's so lazy, make sure it protects well our darling little miss from the sun!"

One fine August evening, at sunset, Alicia was strolling along a narrow path of the garden, amusing herself by gouging round little holes in the gravel with the point of an umbrella. The smallish but pleasant garden was surrounded by a wall that was covered with climbing roses. A vagabond, who was basking in the sun on top of the wall, broke off a large piece of brick and flung it at Alicia. Hit in her shoulder blade, she reeled and almost fell - and was just about to scream when she noticed that her persecutor betrayed neither anger nor joy. Instead, he again hit her in the back with another piece of brick. The ruffian's face expressed merely the laziness of an afternoon siesta, indifference and cynicism. Seeing this, Alicia, her lips quivering with pain, gave him a faint smile. Then the vagabond slid off the wall and disappeared. She returned home, repeating: "I smiled..."

"Alicia! Alicia!" cried Mme. S, her mother. "Your afternoon tea, Alicia!"

"Coming, Mama," Alicia said.

"Why are you slurping like that, my child? That's no way to drink tea!"

"The tea is very hot, Mama," Alicia replied.

"Alicia - don't eat the piece of bread that fell to the floor."

"That's out of thrift, Mama."

"Look, Bibi is sitting up and begging for his little share of bread and butter. You should be ashamed of being selfish, my child - oh, oh, why did you step on the poor dog's foot? What's gotten into you today? What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, I'm so distracted," said Alicia, dreamily.

"Mama, why do men wear pants? After all, we also have legs, don't we? And why do men have short hair? Do men get their hair cut short because... because they have to or because they want to?"

"They wouldn't look good with long hair, Alicia."

"But why would they want to look good?"

Saying this, she furtively hid up her sleeve a small silver spoon with which she had been drinking the tea.

"Why?" Mme. S. went on. "And why do you have your hair curled? So the world will seem more beautiful and the sun won't spare people its rays." But Alicia had already gotten to her feet and walked off into the garden. She drew the spoon from her sleeve and for a while looked at it irresolutely. "I stole it!" she whispered, astonished. "I stole it! What am I supposed to do with it now?" Eventually, she buried it under a tree. Oh, if Alicia hadn't been hit with a stone, she wouldn't have stolen the spoon. Perhaps women don't like extremes in external life, but internally they can exploit every situation to the utmost if they so wish.

Meanwhile, Major S., a portly stout man, appeared in the doorway of the house, calling: "Alicia! Your fiancé has returned from a voyage to China and is coming tomorrow!"

Alicia's engagement had taken place four years before, when she was a young girl of seventeen summers. "Would you allow this small hand to be... mine?" asked the young man indistinctly.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm asking for your hand, Alicia," stammered the young suitor.

"Well, I hope you don't want me to cut off my hand, do you?" said the naive girl, blushing.

"Then you don't want to be my fiancée?"

"Of course I do," she replied, "but only if you give me your word that you'll never demand any of my limbs - that doesn't make any sense!"

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "You don't even realize how charming you are.

Intoxicating!" He spent a whole evening wandering in the streets and repeating: "She took it literally, thinking that I... wanted to take her hand, as I might a piece of cake. This makes me want to drop to my knees!"

Without question he was a very handsome young man: he had a white complexion and contrasting red lips, and his soul was in no way inferior to his physical beauty. How rich and varied is the human spirit! Some build their morality on rectitude, and others on the goodness of their heart; with Pavel, however, virginity was the alpha and omega, the fundament and the summit. Virginity constituted the foundation of his soul, and twined around it were all of his lofty instincts. Chateaubriand [\[50\]](#) also regarded virginity as

perfect and sighed for it, saying: *"Thus we see that virginity, which ascends from the lowest link in the chain of beings, reaches up toward man, from man to angels, and from angels to God, in whom it loses itself. God is the great recluse of the Universe, the eternal youth of the worlds."*

If Pavel fell in love with Alicia, that was because her elbow, small hands and tiny feet were more innocent, either by their nature or as a result of the scrupulous care of her parents, than usually happens - and because she seemed to him to be virginity itself. "She's a virgin..." he thought. "She understands nothing. Stork. No, this is too beautiful to think about, unless - on bended knee."

Passing by the municipal slaughterhouse, he added: "Maybe she also thinks that a stork brings little calves ready to serve...? Veal roast ready to serve on Mama's table...? Bah! This is sublime! How can I not love her?"

How can I not worship the Creator?! Inconceivable! How wonderful of Nature to allow something like virginity to exist in this vale of tears. Virgins - that is to say, a separate category of beings, who are confined, isolated, unwary and separated from others by an invisible thin screen. They tremble from eager anticipation, breathe deeply, brush without penetrating, distinct from their surroundings, under lock and key, away from obscenity, sealed up - and that's not merely an empty phrase or a figure of speech, but a genuine seal, as good as any other. A striking combination of the physical and the metaphysical, of the abstract and the concrete - from a slight, purely corporeal detail emerges a whole sea of ideals and miracles, which are in flagrant contradiction to our sad reality.

Eating a dish of veal roast she isn't aware of anything, doesn't suspect anything; she eats innocently, just as she does everything from morning till evening. When was it that she said "a little spider" instead of "spider" - a little spider eats tiny flies?! O Wonder! She is innocent in the living room and in the dining room and in her bedroom, behind the white lace curtain, and in the toilet... Quiet! Awful thought!" He clenched his jaws and his whole face began to tremble nervously. "No, no," he whispered, "she doesn't do that at all, she isn't aware of that, or there would probably be no God in heaven." But he felt he was lying. "In any case, that happens beyond her consciousness, with her spirit being absent then - as if automatically...

Still, what a horrible thought!

And what about me? To think that I'm able to contemplate something like that without becoming deaf and blind in the face of this horror! I'm so vile! It's not her fault that this has befallen her but mine, for I'm spoiled and filthy, and I can't be inwardly silent. Don't I owe some of my own ignorance to her virginity? Yes, to truly love a virgin like her, I must be an unwary virgin myself, or our idyll will come to nothing.

So I want to be a virgin, but what should I do to become one? In fact, I'm not a virgin. True, I could wrap myself, like a priest or a monk, in black cloth, commit myself to fasting and cassock, and live in chastity - but what good would that do me? Is a monk or a priest a virgin? No, a hundred times no, the secret of male virginity lies elsewhere. First, I have to close my eyes tightly, and then obey my instinct. I feel that my instinct will show me the way. Yes, just as I feel by instinct - although I wouldn't be able to say why her ears are more innocent than her nose or why even more innocent than her ears is the gentle slope of her shoulders, and her thumb is less innocent than her forefinger - so I can, in this respect, evaluate every detail of her figure. Likewise, instinct will be my



guide in achieving male virginity and becoming worthy of Alicia.

Is it necessary to dwell on the question where his instinct led him? After all, everyone experiences a similar feeling between the ages of thirteen and fourteen. His parents had intended him to become a merchant, but he hesitated only between two occupations - those of soldier and sailor. True, in the occupation of soldier there are blind obedience and a hard bunk, but then there is also lack of space. Sailors, on the other hand, have an advantage over others because, deprived of the company of the opposite sex as they are, they have space, the sea and freedom. What's more, seawater is full of salt. Rocking slightly, the ship whirls them away to distant lands, amid fantastic palm trees and colored peoples, to a world as unreal as that which Alicia and her peers dream about in their white beds. People have good reason to call these distant lands "virgin" - lands where men wear braids and where ears, weighed down by metal hoops, droop as far as shoulder blades and where, under the baobabs, idols devour slaves or newborns while the whole populace engages in ritual contortions. A kiss by rubbing noses, practiced among savage tribes - didn't it originate in a dreamy innocent little head? Pavel had spent long years there. He was amazed to discover that the local virgins, who wore neither skirt nor blouse, were turned all inside out. "Hideous...", he thought. "Obliteration of charms..." Indeed, color itself decides the matter... If you're red, black or yellow - with skirt or without - you can't aspire to be a virgin, and that's that. "Hey, you there - Moni, Buatu," he said to a certain Negress, "you be naked... you no blush... you be black, grinning, grotesque - you can't grasp the divine embarrassment of innocence which makes a virgin avert her face timidly."

Short skirt, blouse, small umbrella, chatter, saintly naiveté dictated by instinct - it's all delightful, but not for me. Being a man, I can neither hunch my shoulders nor strike an innocent pose. Quite the opposite: honor, courage, dignity and reticence are the attributes of male virginity. Yet in my attitude toward the world, I should preserve a certain form of male naiveté, analogous to that of a female virgin. I have to sweep everything with a clear glance. I have to eat lettuce. Lettuce is more innocent than a radish. Why? Who would take a guess? Maybe because it's more sour. But then again, a lemon is even less innocent than a radish.

So too there exist, on the masculine side, lovely mysteries, matters sealed up by seven seals - a banner, death under a banner. What else? Faith, blind faith, is a great mystery. A godless wretch is like a woman of easy virtue, who is accessible to everyone. I should love, believe blindly and be ready to consecrate my life, to elevate something to the rank of my ideal - yes, but what? Anything. Just to have an ideal. I'm a male virgin overwhelmed by my own ideal!"

And so, after an absence of four years, he was strolling with his fiancée along the alleys of the small garden. They made a fine-looking couple. Mme. S., embroidering a napkin, was watching them lovingly from the window, and Bibi, on the lawn, was chasing small birds which, all atwitter, were fleeing from his red little tongue. "You've changed," said the young man with an air of sadness. "You don't chatter as in the old days and you don't wave your little arm about..." "No-no, I love you just as always," replied Alicia, distractedly. "There, you see! Back in the old days, you wouldn't have said that you loved me. I didn't expect this of you, Alicia - didn't expect this to pass from your lips, didn't expect your tongue and your lips to shape this shameful word. At any rate, you're sort of restless,

excited... you're not ill, are you?"

"I love you, but..."

"But what?"

"But won't you laugh at me?"

"You know that I never laugh. I only smile a radiant smile."

"Please tell me all about love and about myself."

"Oh, I've been waiting for this moment for so long," he exclaimed. "What's love about?"

Let's go and sit on that bench."

"Since our first parents in Paradise tasted from the Tree of Knowledge at Satan's instigation, everything, as you know, has changed for the worse. 'Oh, God!' begged the people, 'give us back just a little bit of our lost chastity and innocence.' God looked hopelessly down on that mob - and he didn't know how and where to place Chastity and Innocence in that filthy horde. And it was then that He created a virgin, closed that vessel of chastity up tight, and sent her down to the people, who were burning for the virgin with a nostalgic longing."

"What about married women?"

"Married women are nothing, they're a joke, an opened stale bottle."

"But why do men throw stones at virgins?"

"What do you mean, Alicia?"

"It's happened to me more than once," said Alicia, a blush suffusing her cheeks, "that a man or two that I met in an empty street threw a stone at me... when nobody was watching."

"What is it you're saying?" said Pavel, astounded. "I've never heard anything quite like it," he whispered. "What do you mean, a man threw a stone at you?"

"He picked up a stone, a large piece of brick, and threw it at me. It was painful," whispered Alicia, quietly.

"That ... that was nothing... It must have been wicked people.... doing it for fun or for target practice. Don't think about it anymore."

"But why do virgins smile then?" persisted Alicia.

"Why do they smile? What do you mean? What is it you're saying, my child? Did it often happen to you?"

"Oh, very often, almost every day, when I was by myself or with Bibi."

"What about your girlfriends?"

"They complain about that too. You can't help but smile, even though it hurts," she went on pensively.

"How original," thought Pavel as he returned home. "How poignant, and even brutal! Throwing stones at virgins - I've never heard anything quite like it. True, these things are usually kept secret. She herself admits that this happens only when nobody is watching. It's brutal, no doubt - but at the same time charming. Why? Because it's instinctive. I'm deeply moved and oddly excited. Oh, the world of virgins, the world of love, is full of these enchanted oddities. Strangers smile at each other in the street; somebody caresses somebody else's elbow; a smile through the tears or a kiss by rubbing noses is not at all less strange than the throwing of a stone. It's possible that there exists a whole code of agreed-upon signs and methods of which I, constantly staying with the savages in China and Africa, know nothing.

The distinctive characteristic of virginity is that everything connected with it takes on

a different meaning than it has in reality. The throwing of a stone is not as offensive to a male virgin as even the slightest brush of a cheek with a hand. Any ordinary person or common woman would have fled screaming - but she smiled out of some unfathomable depths. An ordinary person would have been concerned only about fleeing the site of battle, if possible saving his or her own skin. To me, on the contrary, honor and a flag are everything - a flag or, strictly speaking, a colorful rag flapping in the wind.

Monarchy is more innocent than republics, for it has more of a mystery about it than talkative members of Parliament. A monarch - revered, sinless, without blemish, free of responsibility - is a virgin and, on a smaller scale, a general is also a virgin.

O holy secret of existence! O wonder of being! Receiving your gifts I will not watch you closely. Quite the opposite, only a humble bow of the head, deep sigh, reverence and gratitude, pantheism [\[51\]](#) and contemplation - but no fatal results of analysis. Virginity and mystery are one; let's beware, then, of lifting the sacred veil."

Alicia, in her turn, also gave herself up to reflection.

"How strange is the world! Nobody will give you a straight answer, but always a symbolic one. You can't find out about anything. Naturally, Pavel told a legend. I'm everywhere surrounded by symbols and legends, as if everybody conspired against me. Paradise, God... who knows, maybe this was also invented especially for me or for us, young girls. I have a definite feeling that everybody is concealing something and pretending, and that everything is based on conspiracy. Mama is also in league with Pavel. It's so sweet to slurp drinking tea and step on puppies' feet... Yes... Religion, duty and virtue, but it seems to me that behind that, as behind a screen, there exist some definite gestures, some movements and that every lofty slogan can be resolved into a definite gesture and a definite point.

Oh, I can imagine! Generally, everyone is fully dressed and acts kindly, but when left alone with one another, men throw stones at women, while the latter smile because it's painful. Then they steal... - didn't I myself steal the silver spoon and bury it in the garden because I didn't know what to do with it? Mama often read out loud about theft in the papers - now I understand what it means. People steal, slurp drinking tea, step on dogs' feet and altogether act perversely - and that's what love is. Virgins are raised in ignorance so that things will be... more agreeable. I'm trembling all over."

*Alicia to Pavel:*

*"Oh, Pavel! Somehow things are different from what you say. Oh, I'm bursting out all over! Yesterday I heard Mama say to Father that the unemployed were 'multiplying' terribly, that they were walking around 'half-naked', eating some disgusting scraps of meat, and that the number of thefts, fights and robberies was growing by leaps and bounds. Tell me everything - tell me what it all means, what do they need these 'scraps of meat' for, why 'half-naked'? Oh, Pavel, let me finally know what to hold on to, I'm begging you. Ever yours, Alicia."*

*Pavel to Alicia:*

*"My dearest! The things that you imagine in that poor little head of yours! I implore you by our love: don't ever think of that. True, such things do exist, you see them once in a while, but you can easily lose your virginity thinking about them - and then what? The truth of chastity is vastly superior to the filth of reality! Let's be ignorant, let's live*

*sustained by innocence, let's live by our youthful virginal instinct and let's beware of mentally inquiring into unnecessary matters, as once happened to me when I first met you. Awareness makes things ugly, and unawareness beautiful. Eternally yours - Pavel."*

"Instinct," thought Alicia, "instinct... yes... but what does this instinct want? What is it I want? I myself don't know... to die or to eat something tart. I won't regain my peace of mind, unless... I'm so ignorant, blindfolded, as Pavel would say - sometimes it's truly frightening... My instinct, the instinct of a virgin - it will show me the way!"

The next day she said to her fiancé who, intoxicated with bliss, was contemplating her elbow:

"Pavel... I have such wild fantasies!"

"All the better, my dearest, that's exactly what I expect from you," he replied. "What would you be without whims and fantasies? I adore that pure unreason!"

"But my fantasies are strange... and I'm ashamed to reveal them."

"You can't have any other because you're unaware of things," he replied. "The wilder and the stranger the fantasy, the more eagerly I would fulfill it, my precious flower. By giving in to it, I'll pay homage to your virginity and mine."

"But... You see - somehow things are different... Oh, I'm bursting out all over... Tell me... have you ever... have you also... stolen anything...like others?"

"Who do you take me for, Alicia? What is this supposed to mean? Could you ever, even for a moment, take a liking to a man tainted with such an offense? I've always tried to be worthy of you and chaste - obviously, within the bounds of my own manhood."

"I don't know, I don't know, Pavel - but tell me, and please be frank, tell me if you ever, you know - deceived or bit anyone, or walked around... half-naked or slept on top of the wall, or mugged anyone or licked anything, or ate something disgusting?"

"My child! What is it you're saying? Whatever gave you that idea? Think again, Alicia... could I possibly lick or deceive? What about my honor? You must be insane!"

"Oh, Pavel," said Alicia, "what a wonderful day - there isn't a single cloud in the sky and you need to shield your eyes from the sun."

Engrossed in conversation, they went around the house and stopped in front of the kitchen where, lying about on a garbage heap was a bone, abandoned by Bibi, with pink remnants of meat.

"Look, Pavel - a bone," said Alicia.

"Let's leave here," said Pavel. "Let's leave here. I can't stand that evil smell and those noisy scullery maids. No, Alicia, I'm surprised that a sweet person like you can think such thoughts."

"Wait, Pavel - let's not leave yet. It seems that Bibi didn't gnaw it clean... Oh, Pavel ... Oh, what I'm like... I myself don't know... Oh, Pavel."

"What is it, my dearest, perhaps you're feeling faint? Perhaps you're exhausted from the heat, it's so hot."

"Oh no, not at all... Look, it's watching us - as if it wants to bite us, devour us. Do you love me very much?"

They stopped in front of the bone, which Bibi had sniffed and licked, reviving memories.

"Do I love you? I love you with the kind of lofty love you can probably find only in the mountains."

"I wish so much, Pavel, that you would gnaw... I mean, that we would gnaw clean that bone on the garbage heap. Don't look, I blushed," she snuggled close to him. "Don't look at me now."

"The bone? What was that, Alicia? What did you say?"

"Pavel," said Alicia, snuggling close to him, "that... stone, you know, made me strangely restless. I don't want to know anything, don't tell me anything - but I feel oppressed by the garden and the roses and the wall and my white dress, and oh, I don't know, perhaps I would like to have a bruised back... The stone whispered to my back that there was something out there beyond that wall and that I would eat that something, gnaw that something off that bone, or rather, we would gnaw it off together, Pavel, I and you, you and I, I must, I must," she persisted vehemently, "without it I must die young!"

Pavel was astonished.

"My dear child, what do you need that bone for? You're insane! Since you're so determined to have it, order a fresh bone in bullion."

"But the point is to gnaw the one on the garbage heap!" cried Alicia, stamping her small foot in a fit of petulance. "And on the sly too, in fear of the cook!"

All of a sudden they had an argument, which was heated and oppressive as the scorching heat of a setting sun in July. "But Alicia, it's disgusting, smelly, ugh, it simply makes me sick to the stomach. Come on, this is the exact spot where the cook pours out the refuse!"

"The refuse! I feel sick and faint myself - and the refuse also makes my mouth water! Believe me, Pavel, you can gnaw it, you can eat it! I have the feeling that everybody is doing it when nobody is watching."

They argued a long time.

"This is disgusting!"

"This is blind, strange, mysterious, shameful and delicious!"

"Alicia!" Pavel exclaimed at last, rubbing his eyes in amazement. "For God's sake ... I'm beginning to doubt. How is it possible? Dream or reality? I don't want to question you, God forbid, I'm not curious, but... Are you joking with me or making fun of me? What's happened here? A stone, you said? Could it be that - that stones were thrown and from this... comes some unhealthy desire for bones? It's too wild, too sort of impure, no, I respect your fantasies - but it's no more any instinct of a virgin - it's all pulled out of thin air."

"My finger?" asked Alicia, mishearing him. "My fingers, aren't they a part of my virginity? After all, you yourself said that I must close my eyes without thinking, quietly, naively and purely, and - oh, Pavel, quick, look, the sun is shining and that little worm is creeping sluggishly along the leaf - and oh, I'm really bursting out all over! Everybody is doing it, I can tell you, only we...only we aren't aware of it! Oh, you think that nobody ever... but I'm telling you that in the evening stones whistle by and fall like heavy hail, so that you can't even blink while people, in the shade of trees, hungry and half-naked, gnaw bones and other garbage! It's love - love!"

"Ha! You really are insane!"

"Stop it!" she shouted, tugging at his sleeve. "Come on, let's go to the bone!"

"Never! Never!"

In fact, out of desperation he might have hit her! Just at that moment, however, they heard something like a thud and a groan beyond the wall. They ran up to it and craned

their necks over the climbing roses: out there in the street, under a tree, a young girl, barefoot and doubling up in pain, was pressing her lips to her upraised knee.

"What's that?" Pavel whispered.

Suddenly another stone pierced the air and caught the nape of the girl's neck. She fell, but instantly sprang to her feet and darted behind the tree - and then, out of some depths, a man's roar reached them:

"I'll teach you! There's more where that came from! You'll see! Thief!"

The air was caressing and burning, and the silence of Nature ensued - one of those quavering, fragrant moments of rapture...

"You see?" whispered Alicia.

"What was that?"

"They're throwing stones at girls... throwing stones... for fun... for the delight of it..."

"No, no... Impossible..."

"Well, you've seen for yourself... Come on, the bone is waiting for us, let's go to that bone! We'll gnaw it clean together - do you want to? - together! I and you, you and I! Look, I already have it in my mouth! Now it's your turn! It's your turn!"

## NOTES

50. *Vicomte de François Auguste René Chateaubriand* (1768-1848): French writer and statesman, one of the greatest stylists in French literature. Although passages similar in style (rather than in content) can be found in "Atala" (1801) and "The Genius of Christianity" (1802), the "quotation" given by Gombrowicz appears to be a tongue-in-cheek misattribution.

51. *pantheism*: doctrine that identifies the universe (Greek *pan* "all") with God (Greek *theos*).